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Fumi Saito

1

I don't have any friends.

Not because I hate talking to others, or because I'm mistrustful, or because I'm too lazy to cultivate contacts. It's not like I deliberately want to avoid making friends; put plain and simple, I'm just unable to make any.

My mom always tells me that it's no big deal, since I'm smart and my grades are good, but from my perspective *that's* no big deal. She doesn't know how cumbersome school is for people who can't make friends.

Just like right now: Even though it's break time and everyone's engaged in chats, I'm sitting here alone as if I were in another dimension. It gets even worse during the lunch break, when I wordlessly munch away on my lunch while all my classmates put their desks together and eat together—I always feel like a castaway on a desert island surrounded by the vast ocean.

From time to time I wonder if all the other people are just aliens wearing human disguises who are deceiving me, the last living earthling.

Ridiculous. Ridiculous, indeed, but that proves how alone I feel when I'm at school.

Because I have nothing to do between classes, I started reading books in my free time even though I don't really like doing so. Thanks to that, I've become even harder to approach and widened the gap between me and my classmates even further. It's a vicious cycle: I'm mistaken for someone who likes being alone, even though that's downright wrong. I'd love to chitchat, too! I want to chat about who's the coolest guy in our class or who my favorite member in whatever boyband is too! But I'm ignored. I'm only reluctantly approached by others when absolutely necessary.

Why am I unable to make friends? What makes me different from everyone else? Since I have nothing to do anyway, I often mull over this question.

It must be because I'm ugly. I have a lot of pimples, my eyes are small, and my nose is flat, just like my breasts. But do I really look that terrible? I don't think so. It's wrong to blame my looks, at any rate.

It's my communication skills. Right, I'm not good at talking to others. But why is that? Because I'm always cautious? Because I get nervous when I'm talked to? No, that's not all there is to it. That's just another vicious cycle that started because I don't often talk to others.

The root cause must be that... I'm scared of getting hurt. I'm scared of being thought of as an oddball. I'm scared of spoiling the mood by making an inappropriate remark. I'm scared of others' opinions of me.

Before I know it, I'm gazing at Mizuhara-san's group in the second row by the window. Mizuhara-san is sort of the leader of this class, and as such has lots of friends. They seem to be having a lot of fun. They're really enviable.

But even among the members of such a close group, I'm sure that people could name others in the same group who they don't like. Nobody is perfect. Everybody has characteristics that might cause resentment. I, for one, have lots of them.

Therefore, it must be impossible to make friends for me.

But that's okay.

I may have no normal friends, but I do have a best friend.

I have one irreplaceable best friend—

—Reina Kamisu.

“You’re too kind, Fumi, that’s your problem.”

That’s what Reina said to me on our way home when I told her about my take on why I can’t make any friends.

The smile she flashed while saying that was so stunning that I couldn’t help admiring her for a few moments. Her long hair is the purest raven-black and so smooth that it’s unthinkable to find any split ends, while her body is curvy like a model’s, unlike my immature development.

Reina is truly beautiful. Absurdly beautiful.

“I’m kind...? I don’t think so. I just don’t want to be hurt.”

“But isn’t that what makes you kind?”

“Why so?”

“I mean, it’s not like everyone else *wants* to be hurt, right? They don’t want to be hurt, either.”

“But they get along with each other.”

“Yeah. Then what distinguishes you from them? Let me tell you: You’re sensitive to the wounds of others. You are scared of being hurt, Fumi, but you’re also scared of hurting someone.”

Well, of course I don’t want to hurt others randomly.

“That’s why you are very kind to everyone.”

“Reina...”

I’m really grateful for her words.

But I know that in truth I’m just a coward. Reina has merely put a sugar-sweet coating around the word *coward* before handing it to me.

But that thoughtfulness of hers makes me happy.

Aah, Reina sure is peerless. Even though she’s only in the third year of middle school like me, she’s so different.

“You’re so lucky, Reina...”

“Mm? Why?”

“I mean... you’re pretty and you’re smart... I can’t help thinking that God treats us unjustly.”

Yeah, God is unjust. If he wasn't, Reina and I wouldn't be living in the same world. I suppose God doesn't get around to balancing out everything that he's created, and passes us around even more carelessly than workers do with products on a conveyor belt.

Everyone knows that. But I'm not mature enough yet to accept that I'm "inferior".

"That's not true! You're cute, Fumi," she responds with a kind smile, reading my mind.

"...I'm not. That sounds a bit like sarcasm if it's you, you know...?"

"Ah, that's totally mean! But Fumi... while some people like you prefer me, there are also some people who would prefer you!"

"No."

"But there are! At least there's one, right here," Reina says as she points at herself and smiles.

"But—"

"If," she interrupts me, "If for argument's sake, there were more people who prefer me over you, why should you care? Numbers don't mean anything. Or do you want to be in the spotlight like an idol?"

"That's not it."

"Then there's nothing to worry about, is there? There's at least one person right here who thinks you are irreplaceable. Or are you not satisfied with that?"

"Mmm! I couldn't wish for more!"

"...I see."

Reina puts on her kind smile again, which makes me kind of ashamed of my behavior.

Aah... I'm still such a child. Silly me. Really. I bet Reina thinks that I'm jealous of her beauty, which is actually true. I'm so filthy. Now she's lost faith in me. I'm sure.

“...Fumi, you’re blaming yourself, aren’t you?”

“Eh?”

“My... you really *are* too kind. Do you think I’d taken offense?”

“But—”

“No buts. You’re being a little rude, you know?”

“Eh?”

“Fumi, you are a dear friend of mine. Someone important to me. By acting this way, it almost seems as if you didn’t believe me?”

“Ah...”

“Fumi. I’m your best friend, right?”

“Of course!”

I can say this for certain.

“You’re an irreplaceable friend, Reina!”

A dear friend who could never be replaced.

If Reina wasn’t here, I—

I would long since have—

2

Another bad day starts.

The fact that I'm usually alone in the morning only makes it worse; Reina often has to go early to school because of her morning practice in the track and field club. I did once consider leaving the house at the same time as she does, but waiting in the classroom until classes begin is pretty painful as well, and most of all, I don't want to bother her, so I decided against it.

I walk alone to school and head to the shoe lockers to change into my indoor shoes.

“...”

What is this...?

Morning! I hear someone say behind me (of course not to me) and hurriedly close my locker. After waiting for that student to leave, I open it again.

“Oh, eh...”

There is a letter on my indoor shoes.

I reach out, but at a loss what to do, my hand stays there until another student approaches. On the spur of the moment, I cram the letter into my bag.

Oh my, oh my... i-is this a...?

I get uncomfortable. I don't know why that is, but there are too many people here. I feel like all the people around me are watching me. Whenever a glance crosses my eyes (and I know it just crosses them and doesn't actually perceive me) I feel it piercing through me.

Nobody would care about me, I know that, but I can't help feeling that everybody keeps watching my every step.

Unable to bear the gazes any longer, I escape to the restroom, and hurry into a toilet stall, and take the letter out.

Stuffing it into my bag has left the letter slightly crumpled — sorry to the person who put it into my locker.

I unfold the letter.

"Dear Fumi Saito

I am writing this letter to you because there is something that I have been wanting to tell you.

Please wait in your classroom after school."

That's all there is.

“Ah...hah...” I gasp for air, finally noticing that I haven’t breathed while reading.

What is this about? What... what is this about?

As short as it is, I can still see that, objectively, it’s probably a love letter. However, it’s addressed at me. A love letter addressed at me? Really? Is that possible?

“Of course it’s possible!” Reina says right off the bat.

We’re on break and have come to the landing of the stairs that lead to the roof. Because the roof is inaccessible, the stairs here are virtually never used by anyone, which is why we often use them when we want to discuss something in secret (although it’s mostly me who has something to discuss).

“How can you be so sure?! I mean, we’re talking about me here...!”

“As I told you the other day, Fumi: you are a charming girl.”

I open my mouth to deny what she said, but then I reconsider, thinking back at how we went round in circles last time.

“So, how about it, Fumi?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“What’s your response to that love letter?”

“Ah—”

I had completely forgotten about that because I was fixated on the fact that I’d received one. Right, I still have to respond to it.

“R-Reina, I, I don’t know what to do!”

“To start with, how do you feel about that boy?”

“That boy...?”

I unfold the love letter and check again.

“Well, Fumi? How do you feel about him? Do you know each other pretty well? Or not at all, maybe?”

“—None.”

“Hm?”

“There’s no name.”

“Let me... let me take a look.”

I give Reina the letter. She inspects the piece of paper from all sides, and eventually heaves a sigh.

“You’re right. There’s no name.”

“...You’ve received love letters before, right, Reina?”

“Yes, I have.”

“Were there any without a name?”

“...Hm... maybe there was one, but I think it was a case where the sender was obvious. I always knew who the letter was from.”

“I see...”

I reread the letter. “*Please wait in your classroom after school*” — a sincere request to me.

“...What are you going to do?” Reina inquires.

“Don’t you know pretty well what I’m going to do, Reina?”

“...Right. Well, it’s you after all!” she smiles gloomily.

“Don’t... don’t wait for me today after you’re done with your club activities.”

“Why not...?”

“...” I remain silent, unable to give her a proper answer. I don’t really know why I asked her that, either. Normally, I would want her with me at such times.

Reina gives me a bright smile, “...Hey, Fumi. You’ve been wanting to go to the aquarium, haven’t you?”

“...Yeah. I love dolphins.”

“Let’s go there one of these days, then!”

Why would she propose that now?

“...Mm! It’s a promise!”

I knew why, and that made me happy.

Classes have ended.

I always stay at school even without receiving such a letter, because I wait for Reina’s club activities to end.

Today, however, I had Reina go home herself. I'm alone—alone at waiting for the sender of that letter.

As I gaze at an open book, I ponder over who I want the letter to be from. Kado-kun, the boy who is popular in class because he's good at basketball? Mm, I would be happy. The delinquent of our class, Ashizawa-kun? He's a bit scary, but I think I would appreciate it. How about Kogure-kun, although he's a bit strange? I would probably be a bit wary of him, but still happy. And Dojima-kun, who everyone avoids because he's dirty? I wouldn't want to go out with him, but I would be happy.

It's always a nice thing to be thought of favorably.

But how would I respond when it comes to dating someone?

Right now... I have no such plans, because I don't exactly know what would be expected of me. I'm a bit scared, and I don't know how I should treat the other party.

I guess a proper couple has to kiss? But how does that feel? When do you feel like kissing? How should I react when he wants me to kiss? Would he be hurt when I refused to? I can't refuse then... I don't want to be disliked, after all.

Right. Refusal is no option.

Mm, so it doesn't matter who gave me that letter—I have to obey and *wait in my classroom after school*.

It has become dark outside. The school is going to be closed soon.

Maybe, no one will come. Maybe, it was a joke. If it was—I would feel a bit calmer.

I stow away the book I have hardly read and just gazed at, and prepare myself for taking my leave, when suddenly, the Mizuhara group enters the classroom. They all belong to the tennis club, so I first thought they came to leave their rackets here.

However, their eyes reveal to me that there's more to it.

Mizuhara-san looks at me. “Heh, so you waited.”

“Er...”

The girls around her start to giggle as they watch me getting nervous.

“Did we get your hopes up?” Mizuhara-san asks with a grin.

“Eh, um...”

What should I answer...? What answer do they expect from me?

“Probably... I did get hopes...” I answer honestly.

Suddenly, one of them laughs out loud, unable to hold it in any longer, spurring on the giggling.

“Oh come on, that's stupid! No guy would be interested in a sourpuss like you!”

“Kaho! Don't be so mean to her~!”

“But look...!”

“Well, she *is* pretty gullible, but that makes it clear how serious her case is, right?”

“Yeah, she's obviously not used to this kind of stuff.”

Without giving me a chance to interrupt, Takatsuki-san and Omi-san keep discussing how dumb and strange I am.

I don't know what to do.

Hopes. Right, I had faint hopes that someone might like me. How stupid of me. That's absurd. Completely impossible.

Right now, there is a clear barrier between the rest of the world and me. Transparent, yet tough like tempered glass. Even though they can see me, no one attempts to read what feelings I hold behind my face. Even though they can hear me, no one attempts to understand the meaning of my words.

It's almost like my eyes perceive something entirely different from everyone else. Whenever I reach out my hands, I can only grasp air.

Alone. I'm alone.

Someone likes me? As if. No one is interested in me in the least, except maybe as someone to tease. As a topic to laugh at.

“...uh...”

Ah... I didn't want to cry... but there goes a tear. This will spoil the party. I'm sorry, but I cried, I'm really sorry.

As I expected, they start making uneasy faces.

Desperately trying not to show them my tears, I cover my eyes.

“Aah... we made her cry. Sorry, Saito-san,” Mizuhara-san says gently. “But you know? We didn’t mean to hurt you. How should I put it... you always avoid talking to people, no?”

No, I simply *can’t* talk to people!

“I think that’s not a good thing, so I thought that doing this, kind of like a shock treatment, might help you. I didn’t mean any harm.”

I wonder how much truth there is to that? Maybe that was part of the reason, but how is a fake love letter supposed to get me to speak normally? Was there no other way? Isn’t that just a pretext to tease me?

“No offense! Really! ...Will you forgive me?”

However, there is something desperate in her voice that makes me nod as I still keep my eyes covered.

“Aah, thanks a lot... I’m really sorry. Okay, see you.”

Once I had forgiven them, they quickly left.

...But Mizuhara-san isn’t mean. She may have completely missed the mark, but she did care about me. She does take heed of me.

Yeah, she’s not mean. She’s not.. mean.

“What a mean bunch!”

My inner dialog is being denied. Surprised by that sudden voice, I look up.

“Ah... Kimura-kun...”

Oh no, he saw my tear-stained face. I must look horrible right now...

“Sorry! I allowed myself to overhear your little conversation,” he says with an uneasy expression.

“Mmm! I-It’s fine...” These words escape my lips because I want to reassure him.

“...They teased you with a fake love letter, right? That’s cruel. She... Mizuhara’s always like that. You could say that her hobby is to toy with the feelings of others!” Kimura-kun rants, seeming genuinely angry at her.

Is he angry for my sake? For real? If so, why?

Okay, what am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to calm him down?

“It’s okay, Kimura-kun... I knew it was just a trick.”

“You knew it was a trick?” he asks while raising an eyebrow.

“I knew that... it would end like this.”

“...But why didn’t you ignore the letter, then?”

“____”

I couldn’t give him an answer. I have no idea how to put it into words.

“Well, whatever... anyway, if something like this happens again, be sure to let me know!”

“Eh?!”

“W-What? You don’t trust me, or what?”

I shake my head furiously. It’s only natural that I would get startled — after all, he doesn’t profit in any way from helping me.

“You’re quite the strange girl... okay, gotta go!” he says as he puts a hand on my head with a smile, after which he left. Unable to make sense of that, I just watched him baffledly.

While walking home alone, I start reflecting on the reason why I couldn't ignore the letter.

I expected the letter to be fake — because there was no name, because the paper used was not typical for boys, and most of all, because I noticed that the writer had deliberately tried to fake her handwriting.

However, what if, as unlikely as it is, the love letter had been real? In that case, ignoring it would have hurt that person. I would have betrayed that person and his sincere request *to have me wait*. I couldn't do that. Absolutely not.

Besides, I couldn't have ignored it either way: the person who wanted to make a joke at my expense wished for me to take on the role of a fool. Had I ignored that request, I would have betrayed their expectations. I would have spoiled their fun. I would have fallen into their disfavor.

That's why I was unable to ignore the letter.

Did I make the right choice? No, I'm sure I didn't. If I were right—

—It wouldn't hurt so much.

Reina.

It hurts, Reina!

I don't want to be **here**, it hurts!

For the first time in a long time, I have to face that thought again. That thought I always held before meeting Reina.

Right, if Reina wasn't here, I—

I would long have—died.

I have thought about dying countless times.

I'm sure there is no such thing like happy times.

Adult people lie when they speak of their supposedly happy youth. If they don't, then nostalgia must have warped their memories, because they couldn't endure the absence of hope in reality otherwise. Thinking that back in the day, everything used to be better, in order to put up with the present.

This leads to my hypothesis:

Life is and will always be hopeless. We live our pitch-dark lives as we cling to shiny shards that appear every now and then, and then we think back at those shards with a nostalgic smile on our faces. Like fools.

However, I don't have a past to take refuge. I don't have a past to romanticize in my mind when I lose hope in reality. I have no other choice but to accept that life is filled with despair from bottom to top.

Therefore, the only place I can escape to is death.

Don't think of suicide, people say. But is that statement backed by actual thought? You shall not kill. Of course. You shall not steal. Of course. You shall not

commit suicide. Of course. The answer is so obvious that there is no place for doubt. Those statements must be perfectly true. Dazzlingly true.

You have to walk an endless muddy path that has no significance whatsoever, and you are naturally not allowed to break out. What a hopeless system.

What do you want me to do? What the hell am I supposed to do?

Someone save me! Give me hope! No, I won't be so greedy. Please someone, just notice that I'm walking this path and say a few gentle words to me...

“Fumi.”

Surprised by the voice that calls out to me at the perfect moment, I raise my head.

“Reina...”

Only after speaking these words do I notice that I have been crying.

“You told me to go home, but you didn't tell me not to come meet you, right?” she smiles gently at me.

“...I can't.”

Even though she understands what I mean, she gently embraces me.

“...It was painful, wasn't it?”

I can't... I just can't anymore!

I'll depend on you, Reina! I'll lean against you! I'll entrust my life to you!

“It's okay,” she whispers to me. “I won't betray you.”

“—!”

I clearly understand now why I had Reina go home earlier.

It's because I knew that she would comfort me.
Because I knew that I would depend on her.

What is the consequence of that?

I have long lost my balance to be **here**, and needed something to take refuge in.

Needless to say, Reina Kamisu has taken on the role of my refuge, of my shelter.

But now, because of her embrace, I have completely become dependent on her. Maybe that has already been the case for a long time, but either way, I can no longer exist without Reina.

In order to prevent that, I have sent her home.

“...Reina...I...”

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. I’ll... take on your burden.”

Her words pierce through me.

I feel how my entire body starts to melt into Reina’s body. Slowly but surely, I fade into her.

Such bliss.

I realize that this is what it means to be accepted by someone.

“Uh...gh...,” I moan as my tears push up. They fall onto Reina, producing small ripples. I always thought my tears would only fall to the ground, but I was wrong — they have reached Reina’s heart.

I am part of Reina, and—
—Reina is everything of me.

3

I am changing. The liquid “Reina” is continuously being poured into the container “I”, while the liquid “I” is overflowing from that container.

The container is still me, but its contents are Reina; Reina has become my essence.

I still hardly speak anything in the classroom (although Kimura-kun, whose desk is behind mine, talks to me from time to time), but I don’t feel depressed anymore.

I am not alone.

That belief gives me strength. That thought I have been holding has gone somewhere far away.

I don’t care about anything, as long as Reina is with me.

That’s what I thought. That’s what I believed.

But not in my wildest dreams did I expect that things could still get worse.

“I can’t find my wallet!” Mizuhara-san screams agitatedly.

Everyone present at the homeroom after classes, our class teacher Kosugi-sensei included, focuses on her as she desperately searches for her wallet. The member of her group are watching her worriedly. For a few moments, the classroom lapses into silence, until someone checks if their own wallet is still there, and the

others follow suit. I don't bring my wallet to school, but I reach into my pocket nonetheless in order not to be the odd one out.

By the time everyone has confirmed that their money is safe, Mizuhara-san is sitting still in her seat, visibly troubled. Kosugi-sensei walks toward her.

"Have you found it?"

"No..."

"Are you sure that it was there?"

"Absolutely."

"Understood," the teacher says with a frown and goes back to the teacher's desk. "All right, as you surely heard, Mizuhara has lost her wallet. Of course, this may be some sort of misunderstanding on her end, but—" he starts and explains in a ridiculously roundabout way that there is a chance that a member of this class might have stolen her wallet.

The likelihood of pickpocketing is high, considering what the missing item is. Not far in the past, there has been a fuss over a stolen mp3-player.

Mizuhara-san, convinced that it was a theft, is visibly angered, and so are the members of her group, influenced by her.

"Does anyone have a clue where her wallet might be?" the teacher asks.

The students just exchange glances. The teacher isn't expecting any answers, either — the culprit or those who know who did it wouldn't speak up right now.

Or so I thought. But I was wrong.

Kimura-kun reluctantly raises his hand.

“Kimura, do you know something?”

“No, not exactly... but there’s something that bothers me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think that it’s common to take the wallet when stealing money. Normally, you would just pull out the contents, right? In fact, that’s how the theft in class 5 happened.”

“...Perhaps.”

“Besides, it would make more sense to steal the money of all members of this class instead of only Mizuhara-san’s. Yet, she’s the only victim.”

“What are you getting at?”

“What I want to say is that it’s either a misunderstanding or a vicious joke toward Mizuhara-san.”

“It’s absolutely not a misunderstanding!” Mizuhara-san disagrees loudly. “Someone has played a trick on me!”

“A trick, hm? How much was in your wallet, if I may ask?”

“...1000 yen and change, but so what?” she answers grumpily.

“So it can’t be because of the money, then. It looks like the goal of the culprit was teasing Mizuhara-san; and wouldn’t that narrow down the list of suspects to a manageable number?” Kimura-kun says, causing everyone to exchange glances again.

That means that the culprit has a grudge against her, or at least doesn't think favorably of her?

Arriving at this thought—

—I notice that eyes are starting to focus on me.

“Huh...?”

A few students who aren't looking at me notice that a few of their classmates are focusing on me, and thus follow suit. On seeing that, yet another person gazes at me. All eyes are pinned on me.

Why? Why would they look at me?

This makes it seem like... like—

Our teacher, too, notices that I'm the center of attention, and looks at me, only to move his gaze on to Mizuhara-san. I follow his glance.

For some reason, she makes a face of realization.

“Saito,” the teacher says to me in a stern voice, causing me to wince.

Just because he called my name? ...Yes, but I but I'm not so dumb as to not understand the situation. To me, this is just like a — death sentence.

“Do you know something?”

“Eh? Ah...er...”

I don't know anything! I'm innocent! But... I fail to say so properly.

“What's wrong? I have asked you a question, Saito.”

But he's suspecting me.

“Uh...”

Everyone is looking at me, suspecting me — that's more than enough to make me lose my tongue, but they do not see that.

They understand it like so: I'm panicking because I've been busted, because I'm the culprit.

I'm perfectly aware of that, and I know that I must absolutely answer his question with confidence, but yet I find myself unable to do so.

“I... I...”

If someone was here who understand my personality — if Reina was here — she could explain it to them, but she's not here.

She's not here.

I don't have any supporters here.

“I don't... I don't know any—”

“Kosugi-sensei,” Mizuhara-san says, cutting my desperate words short. I look at her in wonder.

There is no anger in her face anymore.

“What is it, Mizuhara?”

“I did something to Saito-san that may have made her hold a grudge against me. I... I played a trick on her. Thinking about it now... that was mean of me,” she says with tears in her eyes. “But I... I did it because I thought I could help her to open herself!”

Surprised at what she said, I gaze at her. The sorrowful expression on her face isn't faked. Mizuhara-san is honest.

However, it's unclear to me whether she really tried to open my heart with that fake love letter, or just persuaded herself of that noble goal because of the situation she has found herself in.

Whatever the answer is, there is one thing that has become a fact.

Her words have settled my position.

“...”

All eyes fixed on me.

Eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes.

Like light projected through a loop, their reproachful glances pierce through me.

There is no suspicion in them anymore.

It's been decided.

It's been decided that I am the culprit.

“N-No, I haven—”

“It was YOU!” Takatsuki-san cuts me short. “You were pissed off, but you couldn't defend yourself because you were too scared! That's why you resorted to such a dirty trick — to vent your frustration!”

“Don't say that, Kaho. I'm... I'm also at fault...”

Also.

The words Mizuhara-san sobbed subliminally yet clearly implied that I'm the culprit and that she's the victim.

As a result, her words added fuel to the fire. With a fire-red head, Takatsuki-san walks toward me. Fearing to be hit, I cover my head and cower.

However, she did not come to hit me. Her goal was my bag. She picks it up, opens it, turns it upside down and pours its contents onto my desk.

And for some reason, there is an unfamiliar wallet among the things that fall on my desk. However, someone has mangled it with a cutter.

“...Saito, you are to come to the staff room afterwards.”

The moment the teacher says so, uncontrollable sobbing resounds through the classroom.

Needless to say, it was Mizuhara-san.

I look around.

Eyes. Eyes. Eyes. Eyes. Eyes.

Like an ice pick, their reproachful glances pierce through me.

Reina isn't **here**.

In other words—no one is **here**.

I don't have any supporters **here**.

The next day, my desk has disappeared.

Up until now, I have merely been air for everyone, but from now on, they won't even grant me to be air anymore.

I'm not even allowed to exist.

A missing desk in a classroom is like a missing piece in a puzzle; but in this case it's my desk that is missing. I must be the only one who feels that a piece is missing — for everyone else, the puzzle is completed.

I go to the veranda and move the desk and the chair back to their original place. Original place? Really? No, perhaps the original place where my seat is supposed to be is not in the classroom, but at the veranda.

But while that may be true... I don't want to notice.

White, everything turns white.

Everything besides Reina and me turns white.

Like a novel lacking spaces, I'm unable to make sense of the white world **here**. They disappear. Everything besides me flees out of reach.

Or perhaps—

I'm the one who is lacking color.

The lunch break ends without my talking to anyone.

I really haven't spoken a word, since I couldn't meet Reina, either. Not one word has been spoken for me or toward me.

People have stopped speaking to me. No, that's no news, but at least previously, there was no ill will in that.

I wasn't even allowed of the absolute minimum of conversation. Even Kimura-kun wasn't able to overcome the magnetic field around me that has emerged in class.

“...”

I was aware of it.

I was aware of it, but this makes it clear.

No one cares if I just disappeared.

The world wouldn't disappear when I disappeared.

The blue sky would completely ignore me and not even let it rain. No one cares whatever happens to me. I'm absolutely separated from the rest of the world.

Again, a familiar thought assaults me.

—I... I can't endure it anymore, Reina!

Why? What have I done? I didn't want to be disliked. That's all... I just shut myself into my little box because I was afraid of getting hurt, yet why do they pierce it with spears?

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!

Save me Reina, save me Reina, save me rena,
savemerena.

“They're all so mean.”

“—Huh?”

Reina stands before my eyes.

““Huh’? What is it, Fumi?”

“Ah, mmm... nothing.”

Classes have ended; I have caught Reina when she was about to go to her club and consulted her at our usual spot on the stairs to the roof.

Yes, that sounds perfectly natural.

Why is it then that something felt fatally off? There's no reason.

“Why would they think that you’re the culprit without conclusive proof? There’s no way you would do that.”

“...Well, they don’t know my personality. Besides, Mizuhara-san’s wallet was in my bag, so it’s natural that they would think that I did it.”

“Yes, but Fumi... why was that wallet in your bag, anyway?”

“Because—”

I don’t really want to think about it...

“...The first reason that comes to mind would be because someone is trying to set you up.”

“...Yeah, most likely.” Unless I have a split personality. “...Someone who hates me?”

“I... I don’t think so. You’re not one to make a lot of enemies... I think that someone simply thought that it would be easy to lay the blame on you.”

Perhaps.

But anyway, someone hated me enough to be fine with putting the blame on me.

“That’s just heartless! We have to find and teach that culprit a lesson!”

“No... no need to!”

“Why? Aren’t you suffering under the current situation?”

“I am. I am, but...”

“But?”

“The problem isn’t new. It’s merely surfaced now...”

“That’s not... I mean, you weren’t particularly unpopular...”

“You think so? I’m pretty sure it was a matter of time. For example, if Mizuhara-san’s position and mine had been reversed, I most likely would have ended up with the short end of the stick.”

“No, you’re—”

Reina is at a loss for words. When it comes to deciding who is at fault, it doesn’t matter what was done, but who did it. Between a teacher and a student, the student will be the bad one; between a honor student and a delinquent, the delinquent will be the bad one; between a beautiful person and an ugly person, the ugly person will be the bad one.

And of course, between Mizuhara-san and me, I will be the bad one.

In other words, the result has been decided all along. Smart as Reina is, she realizes that.

“...That’s not true!”

Reina doesn’t believe her own words, and looking at her face, she is admonishing herself for faltering.

...But there’s nothing to admonish herself for, since it’s a fact.

“Reina.”

“Hm?”

“You’re still on my side, right?”

“Of course I am!”

Good.

I have a supporter. I have a irreplaceable friend. I have Reina.

So I may still be here.

“Ah—” Reina suddenly says, so I follow her gaze.

“Um...”

Kimura-kun is standing there, seemingly feeling a bit out-of-place.

“...Kimura-kun? What’s the matter?”

“Ah, yes... can you spare a minute?” he asks reluctantly.

“Y-Yeah... what is it?”

“To come straight to the point, Ashi-chan told me to call you out, because I happened to know that you’re here sometimes.”

“Ashi-chan?”

“I’m talking about Ashizawa-kun! Toshiki Ashizawa.”

The bad-mannered Ashizawa-kun...? What would he want from me?

Whatever it is, it can’t be good for me. Kimura-kun’s expression makes this obvious.

“Err... is he... angry?”

“...”

He just gazes closely at me, and eventually averts his eyes.

“...He is?”

“Saito-san. It might be better if you didn’t go,” he mutters with eyes cast away.

...It looks like it's more serious than I thought. But if I don't go, Ashizawa-kun's aversion toward me will only grow.

I—don't want that. I don't want to be avoided even more because of a misunderstanding.

“...I'm going.”

“Okay...” he says as if he was going to get a beating from Ashizawa-kun.

“Fumi,” Reina addresses me in a worried tone.

“I'll be fine,” I smile and wave her goodbye.

Brought to our classroom (Kimura-kun immediately left for his club), Ashizawa-kun drives me into a corner, and without any time for confusion, I am surrounded by his buddies, Takatsuki-san and the other members of the group, while a few of my other classmates are watching from a safe distance. Mizuhara-san is here as well, but watching from afar with an uneasy expression.

“Okay. Do you know what this is?” Ashizawa-kun says in an oppressive voice as he holds something against my face. It's hard to see from such a short distance, but I can recognize that it's Mizuhara-san's wallet.

“—”

I try to answer, but the words stick in my throat. Everyone is watching me closely and with blatant enmity; I feel that I'm not allowed to speak. I'm scared.

His right arm, which is right beside my head, might lose it any moment. He definitely wants to. He is angry. And the perfect target to vent his anger on is right before his eyes.

I'm scared! Why are they looking at me like that? I can't say anything! I'm not allowed to speak!

"Hey! I asked you what the fuck this is!" he yells. His right arm is twitching.

"It's a... wallet..."

"Whose wallet?"

"Mizuhara-san's..."

"Right. It's Yuu's wallet."

Yuu? Come to think of it, that's Mizuhara-san's first name.

"It's the wallet I gave her for her birthday. It's the wallet you cut up with a goddamn cutter!" he says, some of his saliva flying on my face.

Anger has made him lose more than half of his reasoning. Had I been a guy, he would have beaten me up already long ago.

"You knew that Yuu's dating Toshiki, didn't you?" Takatsuki-san says with a scary face. "And you also knew that this wallet was a present from him, right?"

I don't. I had no idea that they were a couple. Such rumors don't reach me at all.

"That's why you stole the wallet when you were pissed off, no? You can't hide it!"

No, I didn't do anything!

But I can't say that. Even if I did and explained myself, they wouldn't believe me.

"Do you get that? This isn't something you can make up for with fucking money!"

His right hand moves. I reflexively close my eyes. However, he could somehow control himself and hit the wall behind me.

I mind goes blank like white paint. I'm trembling all over.

What am I supposed to do? I'm scared! Please, don't hurt me. I haven't done anything!

"Save me..."

I mutter at last, cornered and intimidated.

"Save me..."

At first, the others seem to think that I am begging toward them, but they quickly realize that's not the case and are taken aback.

"Save me..."

I seek help. Of course, there is only one person I would seek help from.

"Save me... Reina."

I didn't want to get Reina involved, so I tried to solve the matter without her coming with me.

But I failed.

I imagine how her long hair sways as Reina appears and swiftly frees me from their claws. I have a feeling that this picture will become reality. And then she will smile at me with her absurdly beautiful face,

"Everything is all right, Fumi."

—However, Reina didn't come.

That sweet illusion took me from the ground to the clouds, to the pinnacle. But at the end of the day, I keep crawling on the ground in reality. I am thrown off the pinnacle again.

“Uh...uh...”

Unable to hold it in, I start to cry.

Thrown off course by my tears, the signs for violence disappear, even though Ashizawa-kun is still visibly angered.

“What?! Do you think we'll forgive you if you cry?!” Takatsuki-san shouts as she draws near to me. “Besides, there's no one who would want to ‘save’ someone like you!”

“But there is...”

“Who? Your mom? A teacher? They would only help you because it's their duty!”

“There is!”

“And who would that be?! Good lord, you are—”

“Reina! Reina Kamisu is there for me!” I scream. In a voice that might well have been the strongest in my entire life.

Takatsuki-san—no, everyone present—widen their eyes in response to my powerful shout. I'm surprised by myself, too, but I don't regret it.

Because that's the one thing that I will not allow anyone to disagree with me.

I do have an irreplaceable friend.

I do have Reina Kamisu.

I won't let anyone say otherwise.

Taking advantage of their confusion, I escape. I escape from them. I no longer need anything. Nothing.

All I need is Reina.

As long as Reina is with me, I'm perfectly fine.

4

As promised, Reina and I went to the aquarium.

There are more visitors than expected for a workday, most of which are families with children and young couples around twenty years old. Probably because they are not as restricted in time.

And of course, we are the only middle schoolers around.

“Reina, are you sure you don't need to go to school?”

“It's fine, but what about you, Fumi?”

“I don't mind at all.”

I'm not welcome at school, anyway. My parents won't notice that I'm skipping, either, unless they get a call from school. In fact, ditching school today has made me wonder why I haven't done this sooner.

I look through the glass into the water tank.

Pretty fishes. That's all that comes to mind. They belong to the species *Chaetodon auripes*, but I'm going to forget that in a few seconds. Therefore, I only feel that they're pretty.

But that's fun.

“Oh, look, Fumi! Lots of jellyfish!”

“Cool.”

“I love jellyfish.”

“You do? Why?”

“Hm? Well... I wonder why? Maybe because... they don’t look a lot like living beings?”

They don’t look like living beings — now that she mentions it, she has a point. Inside an aquarium, they still feel a bit like living beings, but when they are held in a water tank at home, they’re more like decoration. Decoration that shines and pulsates. When jellyfish are put into a tank in a house, their role changes from a *living being* to *decoration*.

“Besides, jellyfish kind of stand out. All other fishes here are just *fishes*, but jellyfish feel like entirely different beings. Ah, I’m not making sense, am I?”

“No, I know what you mean. You want to say that jellyfish are simply jellyfish, right?”

“Ah, yes, sort of. Jellyfish are simply jellyfish.”

Jellyfish are simply jellyfish.

Looking at Reina, who is gazing into the water tank, I think:

Reina’s also like that.

Reina Kamisu is simply Reina Kamisu.

Absurdly beautiful, completely different from everyone else, and my only supporter.

Reina notices my glance.

“...What’s wrong, Fumi?” she asks.

“Mm, nothing.”

She tilts her head.

“Reina... the dolphin show is starting!”

“Hm? Oh, you’re right. Okay, let’s hurry up.”

Slightly swift-footed, walk to the stadium where the dolphin show takes place.

On the way there, we come past a tank in which a large number of fishes are herding together and keep rotating restlessly.

Don’t they get tired? I don’t only mean physically, but also mentally. Rotating all the time won’t get them any farther, after all; they could just as well stay still from the start. If they don’t want to get anywhere, is it their goal to continue doing this until they can’t move anymore? Don’t they feel that such a life is futile?

But the fishes keep rotating, not caring about my thoughts.

The seats at the stadium are being occupied from the back to the front.

“Let’s go to the front row, Reina.”

“Eh? We’ll get wet!”

“I know, but I want to watch the dolphins from as close as possible.”

With a wry but gentle smile, she follows me to the first row and takes a seat.

“By the way, Fumi, I told you why I like jellyfish, but what’s your reason for liking dolphins?”

“Hm... because they’re adorable.”

“That’s all?”

“No, apart from that...”

Before I can continue, the woman in charge of the show begins the narration, starting with a brief explanation on the ecology of dolphins (where their nose is, that they hear sounds through their bones, etc.).

And then the show begins.

As several dolphins leap into the air to greet us, I am already enchanted.

They are pretty big when you actually see them — their jumps are spectacular and cause the children in the audience to shout in joy. They look so majestic yet adorable.

As they land again, water spills toward us. I instinctively shrink back. While it doesn't reach my clothes, my shoes get slightly wet.

Awesome! That's just awesome! Dolphins are great!

During the show, they jumped through rings, returned balls the woman had thrown to them, and swam around in circles... in a nutshell, it was awesome and I was absorbed.

“Dolphins sure are intelligent...” Reina suddenly says.

“Totally!” I respond immediately.

“Hahaha, you really love them, don’t you? Is their smartness also a reason why—”

“Yeah!”

The show reaches the climax, which features a trick where three dolphins have to simultaneously jump over a stick that is set up at an extremely high position.

“And you know, dolphins send out ultrasonic waves and determine the position of objects through the reflected waves!”

“Just like bats.”

“Hmm... I don’t want to think of them in the same category, but yeah.”

The dolphins ready themselves to the woman’s signal.

Are they able to jump so high? Well, they wouldn’t be doing this if they couldn’t, but I’m afraid that one of them might not make it.

I hold my breath.

The dolphins stand side by side (can you say that in this case?) and — jump.

“Whoa!”

It was a feast for the eyes.

With a grand splash, the three dolphins land in the water, raising a few large waves.

“Incredible...” I say in blank astonishment.

Looking at the wavy pool, I arrive at the thought that dolphins might be the cause for the never-ceasing waves of the sea.

“Hey, Fumi? Dolphins can communicate through sounds, right?”

“Yeah. Although it’s unknown how sophisticated their conversations are. I for one believe that their communication skills are just as high as ours.”

“I see... that would be nice.”

“Mm! Actually, another reason why I love dolphins is because they can communicate with one another!”

“Oh, nice.”

The show ends and the visitors start to leave while the dolphins are bidding them farewell by swimming around and doing individual performances.

“You know, when I learned that dolphins can communicate through sounds, I was jealous of them,” I murmur while watching their performance.

“...jealous?” Reina asks puzzledly, tilting her head to the side.

“...”

I waver if I should explain it to her. If I continue, I will spoil the joyful mood.

“I think that communication through words is too complicated for me.”

But I don’t want to have secrets from Reina.

“Fumi...”

“I’m sure that even I would have been able to get friends if we had other ways of communicating...”

“You have me, Fumi!”

“...Mm.”

These words of hers are enough for me.

“But you know, lately I’ve come to think that...”

“Hm?”

“I think that I might have become ‘like that’.”

“...‘like that’?”

Unable to answer her, I look at the dolphins again, which are busy showing their performances. One of them is waving us goodbye with its fin.

I wave back.

And that's what I mean.

I am waving my hand because I freely interpret the dolphin's waving his fin as "goodbye." Our actions aren't in line at all.

Right, as deplorable as it is, I can't talk with dolphins.

But that isn't limited to dolphins.

My language has become different from everyone else's, and that's why I can't get through to anyone. My words don't reach anyone.

Except for Reina.

My way of communication has become different. And that's why I'm getting disconnected and disappearing.

We leave the aquarium, which is in the center of an aquatic park. I walk up to a bench and sit down. Reina sits down next to me.

"Reina? Would you..."

Reina looks at me when I suddenly start to talk.

"Would you be okay if we were the only humans on earth?"

I look around. There's no one nearby apart from Reina, which isn't that surprising for a workday afternoon. We're alone. I wouldn't be in the least concerned if the world closed up right now and we were left behind just by the two of us.

“Hm... it would be pretty troublesome because we’d have no electricity...”

“And if you think about it without such concerns?”

Reina gazes closely at my face, and answers with a smile:

“In that case, that wouldn’t sound too bad.”

“Really?”

“Really!”

I look at her. Aah, she isn’t saying it just because. I’m happy, I really am.

After all, she’s different from me! Unlike me, she is loved by a lot of people. Despite that, she would be with me.

“But you know, Reina, your mom would...be—”

—Reina’s mom?

At once I get suspicious and stop.

A lot of people?

Well, there must be a lot. She’s beautiful and nice, unlike me. But—

—But who are they, specifically?

“Fumi...?”

“Hey, Reina...”

“What’s wrong?”

“...I’ve never been to your home, have I?”

“Are you sure?”

“Where do you live again? Nearby? You must be.

After all, you go home together with me.”

“What’s wrong, Fumi? That’s obvious, no?”

“Why is it then that — even though we are close friends — I haven’t been to your place?”

“...” Reina remains silent.

Eh? Hold on! What’s that supposed to mean?

We’re best friends, no matter how you look at it, so why do I have no idea who her friends and family are, and where she lives?

“By the way, Reina—”

“Don’t say it!” she cuts my question short.

“Reina...?”

“Don’t go farther than that...” she says sorrowfully and averts her eyes.

There are circumstances...? I don’t know what it is, but Reina has a reason not to tell me about her.

Everyone has things he doesn’t want to or can’t say.

But,

But—

“—That’s mean!”

“...Huh?”

“Aren’t we best friends? We shouldn’t keep any secrets from one another! Or was I the only one who felt that way? Hm?”

“No!”

“But then!”

“It’s no good, Fumi!”

“Why? I don’t understand, Reina!” I shout and as I do, I notice that a tear is flowing down my cheek, which leaves Reina speechless.

Cold air pulsates between us. That... hasn't happened before. This is the first time that we've been surrounded by such a cold atmosphere.

My feelings had reached Reina. She knows that I wouldn't ever hate or make fun of her.

There is no reason to have secrets.

There should be none.

Yet—

"I can't say it," she says distinctly.

"Why would you..."

Rejection.

No, that's not it. That can't be it. Reina would never want to hurt me. It's something... it must be something that she can't say despite that.

Of course I can understand that.

But—

"Don't doubt me."

I can't help but feel that she is rejecting me.

"Uh..."

Therefore, a drop falls from my eyes.

And once I realize that it's a *tear*, they start to overflow like a waterfall. Aah, I'm crying way too often lately! Man, I don't want to show anyone my tears. I don't want to bother anyone. But they won't stop.

I press my head against my knees as I burst out crying.

"—Fumi."

Reina's voice.

Reina's gentle voice.

“I’m sorry.”

All I could perceive was my own crying voice, which is why I didn’t notice what was happening.

I kept crying like an idiot, and when I raised my head—

—Reina wasn’t there.

“Reina...?”

I looked and ran around searching for her.

But she was nowhere to be found.

Reina isn’t anywhere anymore.

I was standing there in the wide, empty aquatic park, left behind, alone in the world.

5

People have erasers in their hearts.

While their efficiency differs from person to person — some of them might be really bad — anyone can use their eraser.

Rub, rub. Okay, away with you. You’re an eyesore.
Please go away. Rub, rub.

Two weeks have passed since the incident of Mizuhara-san’s wallet. One week since I went to the aquarium with Reina.

Even after such a time span, no one is talking to me.
Like the previous days, I'm just sitting in my seat, which
isn't supposed to be here, and gazing out the window.

I have faded a lot.

Yet, they keep erasing me. Rub, rub.

Day by day, I am being erased. Bit by bit, I am fading.
Rub, rub. Most of my existence has turned into eraser
crumbs and gets wiped off my desk.

It's not going to get better. They have already become
so used to rubbing me out that no one is having any
doubts about it, let alone feelings of guilt. I'll keep
being erased mechanically. If there is any human
emotion involved, then it's slight irritation because
their erasers get worn with use.

And Reina is still missing in this white and fading
world.

Why? I'm not going to hold out like this! Reina... why
did you leave me, Reina?

Why won't you appear before me? Even if you have
secrets, that should be no obstacle for us!

Or do you hate me now?

Whatever it is, I want to see you!

I want to see you, I want to see you, I want to see you!

But no matter how much I beg, Reina doesn't appear.
And somewhere I know that she never will.
There is no meaning anymore.

In this classroom there is only irrelevant noise, irrelevant pictures, irrelevant classmates, and my irrelevant self.

There is no meaning anymore.

There is no meaning... in being **here**.

“—Goodbye,” I whisper as I stand up.

The teacher is saying something. Ah, I was in the middle of having a ‘lesson’?

Oh, he’s angry. But I don’t get what it’s all about — after all, he isn’t saying it for me, is he?

Oh, he’s not angry anymore. But I wonder why he is looking at me like that? It’s the first time someone does that, so I don’t know what it means. But it looks a bit like he is scared.

I leave the classroom.

Far away behind me, the class is making a fuss, but it’s irrelevant to me. Irrelevant. Completely irrelevant.

I’m sitting alone on the landing in the middle of the stairway to the roof. It’s the second time since I’ve come here that the school building is getting noisy. What time is it? The first noise was probably the lunch break, so it must be the end of school today?

Reina. Will I ever see her again?

For some reason, I feel that I won’t. I’ve been feeling that ever since she disappeared from me in that aquatic park. But so what? What about it? That doesn’t change anything — I still need her, so much, so desperately.

Reina is all of me. Nothing remains if you take her from me. I'm empty. A wobbly lump that has no bones.

“Aah...”

What should I do? How can I meet Reina? I don't know! What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do? What am I supposed to do?

Suddenly, I hear someone walking up the stairs.

I ready myself. It might be him — he might have come like I wanted.

“...Saito-san.”

Kimura-kun appears before me.

“Kimura-kun... so you came to talk with me...”

“Yeah... I have no reasons to refuse if you call me out...”

Right. I have placed a letter into his shoe locker to call him here. Like Mizuhara-san did.

“I also brought this here with me. It was a pain to get past the eyes of the teachers,” he explains as he holds out the keys to the roof.

“Mm. Thank you,” I say and accept the keys from his visibly trembling hands. Perhaps, he has realized why I called him out here.

“...” he remains silent.

“Are you not going to ask...?”

“Ask what...?” he says clumsily.

“Why I had you bring me the keys to the roof.”

After a few moments, he reluctantly asks, “Why?”

To tell the truth, I'm not sure how to answer him, either. Because maybe — no, for sure — my answer is going to hurt him.

But that's okay, isn't it? Kimura-kun is just as irrelevant as my other classmates, after all.

I reply: "To take revenge."

His face freezes instantly.

Oh, so I was right. Finally, I could confirm my suspicions.

"R-Revenge...?" he stutters miserably in bewilderment, and gets even more nervous because of it.

"You cut up Mizuhara-san's wallet and put it into my bag, didn't you?"

"W-Why would you say that...?" he counters, still not admitting to it, even though he knows that he can't talk himself out.

"It's okay! I don't plan to question you about it."

As a matter of fact, I really don't feel like questioning and blaming him. As I once told Reina, I was about to get into this situation anyway — Kimura-kun merely happened to be the one who pressed the switch.

My words seem to have calmed him down a bit.

"B-But... how did you find out?"

Do you really want to know? Isn't that going to be tough on you?

"...Should I answer that?"

Finally noticing the meaning of my answer, he looks down and says, "...No need to."

“Okay.”

With these words, I slide the key into the lock.

There are several reasons why I suspected Kimura-kun.

My first doubts were raised when he started to converse with me after I had received the fake love letter. I was aware that Kimura-kun had no feelings for me, so I wondered why he would suddenly become so gentle.

Another clue was the general reaction when Mizuhara-san’s wallet got lost. Everyone considered me the culprit right away. In other words, something led them to believe that I had a grudge against her. As far as I know, the only discord between Mizuhara-san and me is that love letter, which means that someone must have broadcast the story. But only her group and I, as well as Kimura-kun knew about it. Of course, I haven’t told anyone, and Mizuhara-san and her friends didn’t look like they would want to tell everyone about it, either.

But most of all, it was no one else but Kimura-kun who proposed that the culprit must have had a grudge against her. He called their attention to me in a blatant manner.

I don’t know why he did that. Maybe he had a grudge against me that I don’t know of, or he might have had strong feelings about Mizuhara-san and Ashizawa-kun.

But I don’t really care.

His story is irrelevant to me.

I turn the key, and the door opens with a click. I tentatively turn the doorknob — yeah, seems fine.

“...What do you plan on doing on the roof, Saito-san?”

“...” I silently turn around to him.

“Saito-san...?”

I answer his question with a question.

“Hey, Kimura-kun—”

“—Do you happen to know *Reina Kamisu*? ”

Maybe I really thought that Reina would be waiting for me on the other side of the door.

This is a place that no one is allowed to enter, despite being so near. It’s a place that we all know exists, yet only few have actually been there. And that’s why I felt that I would find her here.

But of course, there is no sign of Reina.

I walk to the center of the roof and spin around.

Students going home, power poles established in regular intervals, the shopping district, our dirty river, another school, a house, another house — irrelevant scenery. But one thing within this irrelevant scenery — the glaring red sun hiding partly behind a building at the horizon — feels relevant to me.

The sun is about to hide on the other side, having completed its work for today, but floating there at the boundary, it feels like it’s calling me.

I return to the door to lock it.
Now I'm completely alone.

I lean against the fence, and while watching the sun slowly hide its countenance, I think once more about Reina Kamisu.

Reina vanished. Yes, she vanished.

A beautiful and popular student suddenly stopped coming to school and went missing. This should have obviously been a serious incident for this Shikura middle school. It should have.

However, no one talks about it.

Of course, there is no one who would tell *me*, but even I can perk up my ears for rumors. It's strange. Reina Kamisu does not come up anywhere at all. No one talks about such a extraordinary girl. Is that even possible?

I screwed up my courage and sneaked a peek into her class. First, I couldn't believe my eyes, then I couldn't believe my ears, and finally, I couldn't believe myself.

Her seat didn't exist. Her shoe locker didn't exist. Her name didn't exist. Nothing related to her existed.

Reina is nowhere.

And when I saw Kimura-kun's face when I asked him about Reina, I was convinced.

—Reina Kamisu vanished.

It's not simple death. She erased everything of her existence, everything related to it, and vanished.

Without leaving anyone anything of herself, and completely revoking the fact that a person named Reina Kamisu has ever existed, she disappeared.

With the exception of me, her best friend.

But even I only have a few empty memories left — much like a drop of soda on the edge of an empty can. I don't remember where we met, how we became friends, or where we went apart from the aquarium. Nothing.

Those memories will soon wither as well, erasing her existence once and for all.

Reina is disappearing.

Reina, who was everything of me, is disappearing.
So—there is no reason for me to be **here** anymore.

I climb on the fence. It's 15cm wide, so I can stand without a problem.

I consider taking off my shoes, but I decide against it; I'm not trying to commit suicide or anything.

I'm merely going to see Reina.

Of course, I can't be sure if I can meet her like that. It's just the absurd thought that if she isn't here, she must be "there." It's about as absurd as thinking that a bird can fly past the sky into the space.

But I can't think of anything else.

There is no other way, and if that's the only way, why should I not try it? There's nothing that stops me. Let me repeat that: I have no reason to be **here**, so there is nothing that stops me.

I suddenly recall what I said to Kimura-kun.

—To take revenge.

Yeah, a petty revenge. By bringing me the keys, you got yourself involved in what is going to happen now, didn't you?

I wonder if he'll be having some pangs of remorse, even though he might not care about me?

I look down, and shrink back a little, scared of the imminent pain that I almost forgot about. That's going to hurt. Ten times... hundred times more than a syringe. But I mustn't flinch.

What is important to me? Meeting Reina. Being together with Reina.

That's all that counts. That's all...

Yes, with vigor!

Because I feel like I can get farther that way.

I take a vigorous leap.

Suddenly, the world spins and changes completely. Unable to properly grasp this unexpected world, I almost pass out.

I can only tell that it's not the place where I wanted to go. I have found myself in a tragic play.

Aah... did I fail? Did I make the wrong decision after all...?

But—

Just as I am about to give up, I realize that I've won the wager.

“Reina...”

Reina is right before my eyes.

“Reina, I missed you...”

She gives me her gentle and absurdly beautiful smile.

“Reina... tell me: where are you?”

“I am—” she answers.

“I am **here**. Kamisu Reina is — **here**.”

Ah, right.

Why didn't I notice such a simple thing?

Atsushi Kogure

1

My heart explodes and comes bursting out of my mouth.

In the eyes of everyone else in this shopping district by the station, nothing special happened. However, *I* have made a horrifying discovery.

Within the crowd of strangers that walk the streets, I have found *her* whom I will never forget.

Burst by an unbearable shock, my pieces stick to all my surroundings. The hundreds of shreds that I have spit out scowl at her from all sides. Noticing my gazes, *she* finds my main body and looks at it.

And—smiles.

Her smile leaves me so thunderstruck that I can't even break down—I just freeze. It's like her smile made away with the very concept of time, let alone my feelings that completely vanished at the sight of her.

The girl before my eyes stands aloof from the world. At the very least, I know that she has no proper moral values.

I am being devoured by her existence.

Only after she goes away am I able to breathe again. I confirm that my emotional perception is still intact, and finally feel alive again.

Right. I—

I *detest* that girl.

She has stolen *everything* from me.

No matter how special and transcendental she is, that doesn't make her sins any lighter.

I won't forgive her. I will absolutely not forgive her. I won't ever forgive her, the cold-blooded killer of my family.

I won't forgive Reina Kamisu!

2

“You met Reina Kamisu?” my doctor asks in wonderment when I tell him about my encounter with that monster.

“Yes. I ran across her. That killer.”

“Reina Kamisu...”

I may have called him doctor, but Doctor Mihara doesn't fit the common image of one. He is a sociable, young psychiatrist and actually still in his twenties.

“Are you sure it was not a dream?”

“It was real! She walked past me before my very eyes! She even noticed me and laughed at me!”

“Hm...” Doctor Mihara folds his arms as he notices that I'm dead serious.

My family was murdered by Reina Kamisu.

To this day it is unknown why she broke into our house and stabbed everyone except me; she didn't steal anything, nor was there a grudge I know of. She hadn't made any threats in advance, either, nor did she seem to enjoy it. In contrary, she seemed to be very intelligent and to have no relation with drugs and the like. In fact, I failed to find a stain in her personality.

But it is for a fact that she killed my family.

Their lives vanished so easily.

I used to think that human lives are special—nothing like the fishes we once dissected at school. The idea of human life and its supposed value used to be huge and boundless in my young mind. In fact, on the assumption that only humans have minds, I still think that our lives are of great value.

However—it's possible to take someone's life with the same knife that you slice open a fish with.

Confronted with that absurd fact as a mere 10-year old boy, I was shattered.

I do have a wound in my chest—due to Reina Kamisu, of course—that is quite grotesque. One of the kind that makes people grimace.

However, the problem with that wound isn't that it scares everyone. The problem is that it is still a wound and not a scar. It's still a gaping wound, and it's going to stay that way. But instead of blood, it's my very own self that is being bled out. "Something" that is needed to live. I'm dwindling. Ever-dwindling.

I'm still breaking bit by bit.

“Atsushi-kun,” my doctor addresses me with a serious look.

“Yes?”

“We’re out of time for today, but can I ask you to tell me more about this in our next meeting?”

“Yes, of course.”

I was planning to do so anyway.

Besides, the only way to fix me is to go against Reina Kamisu; to learn the truth about her; to—understand her.

Can I win against that monster? The odds are against me, I’m afraid. I’m going to lose. I’m going to keep dwindling.

Just like a black hole, there are times when uncalled-for feelings absorb the obvious and make you blind. Therefore, if I want to oppose her, I must seal my emotions—which consist mostly of hatred—away. Thinking back at the outburst of emotions that I experienced when I ran across her the other day, I can imagine how hard that is.

However, no matter how hard the fight against that monster turns out to be, there is no risk for me. I’ve sunken to the lowest point already. While it is hard to fight my way up, I can’t fall any lower.

Therefore, I won’t waver to fight.

“I won’t lose!”

“Against whom...?” Doctor Mihara asks, still serious.

“Against me, of course, and against Reina Kamisu.”

He maintains a pensive look and seems to be groping for words. In the end, he just mutters, “I see...”

The following day, I headed to school like always despite my decision to fight against Reina Kamisu. Truth be told, I would rather look around for her than attend my classes, but added to the fact that I have no clues except for spotting her in town, I don’t want to bother my aunt.

Unlike my uncle, she is treating me really well. I suppose the fact that they don’t have any own children adds to this, but she is looking after me like I were her real son... maybe even more so *because* I’m not her real son. There’s no discontent. There’s no discontent... but there is pressure. I feel that I absolutely mustn’t and *can’t* sadden my aunt, since she is obliged to look after me as well.

I arrive at school and notice that our classroom is remarkably noisy.

Puzzled, I catch Yuuji Kato, who happened to stand nearby and is on comparatively good terms with me. I ask, “What’s the matter?”

“Suicide’s the matter, dude! Suicide!”

“What? But that was, like, last week, no? Did we learn something new about Saito’s suicide?” I ask as I toss my bag onto my desk.

Since she was a person who we would see every day at school, Saito’s death came quite as a shock for us. While she didn’t have any friends—she was even suspected to

have stolen from a classmate—there were still students who mourned for her. Surprisingly though, it wasn't until she died that a few guys came out of their shells and confessed with teary eyes that they had actually been fond of her because she had an “modest” personality unlike most girls nowadays. Saito must have quite mixed feelings up there in heaven, since that personality of hers is what drove her to suicide.

“Are you still making a fuss about that story? Why don't you leave her alone already? I'm sure that she... wouldn't like being the center of attention,” I mention to him.

“You're completely off the mark, man.”

“What do you mean?”

“This is not about Saito, you know?”

“Then who committed suicide?”

Yuuji looks at a certain desk and says, “Kimura.”

Before classes started, all students of our school were summoned to the gym for an emergency speech, where the school director bored us with a lengthy speech on “the value of life.”

While listening with half an ear to what he has to say, I start making my own thoughts about the incident.

It seems like Saito, Mizuhara, and the other people concerned didn't know, but anyone who was either somewhat familiar with Kimura or has enough brains, like me, was aware that Kimura was really the culprit of the stolen wallet incident.

It was a well-known fact among us guys that Kimura had a crush on Mizuhara, and that he was turned down when he confessed to her. She told him that she had no plans of dating anyone in the near future. A few days later, however, she and Ashizawa became a couple.

Needless to say, she only used that phrase to turn Kimura down because she wanted to avoid being too direct, and he must have been aware of that. Nonetheless, Kimura's feelings were hurt. Thoroughly. He must have thought that he was inferior to Ashizawa—a complete drop-out—in Mizuhara's eyes. Starting from then, everything he said and everything he did was underlined with a subtle tone of self-deprecation.

I can see why he would want to damage the present Ashizawa gave to Mizuhara. In fact, I think a little payback like that is very much tolerable. However, he knew that he would be the obvious culprit if he executed that resentful plan of his.

Therefore, he was in need of a suspect other than himself. And he found one in Saito, who just happened to be made a fool of by Mizuhara.

At a glance, Kimura did his job well; at the very least, he managed to trick his main targets—Mizuhara and her group—into believing his lie.

However, in effect he failed horribly.

He didn't take into consideration how much his actions would hurt Saito's feelings because he was too focused on how to force the blame onto her. But his

greatest mistake was not to take into consideration how much his own feelings would be hurt by hurting Saito's.

His revenge inflicted a lethal wound on Saito. Maybe that's not entirely accurate. Maybe he only touched a sore point of Saito's that was already lethal anyway. Nevertheless, Kimura considered himself responsible for her death.

Kimura hurt Saito, and that fact hurt himself. Both of those wounds were lethal, and both of those wounds ended in death. Like... like my own wound.

At last, the school director ends his speech after more than a full hour. I do understand his concern, but that doesn't make it any more worthwhile.

Seriously... he doesn't get that a sermon is not going to achieve anything. We all know perfectly well that one must not commit suicide. And yet there are times when the world we live in becomes so tough on us that we play with the thought. Therefore, it's useless to appeal to ethics; he ought to go with a more practical and concrete approach. If I were to stop suicide, I would do it like this: "Dying means falling into an eternal state of nothingness, a perfect void that can't be conceived by anything that is alive. Just think about it: your brain goes away. You do not have any thought anymore. Surely, you've heard of the phrase 'I think, thus I am,' no? Give it some careful thought. Nothing exists. Do you get this? Nothing exists. How many seconds could you endure being in a world without sound, without light, and without any kind of sensation? A world where

you don't even get hungry. Where you have no desires at all. Can you follow me? But death is a perfect void, so it exceeds even such a sensation-less world. There is no future. Heaven is just a construct people who fear death made up. You should know why there will always be people who believe in a world after death despite the advent of science; it's because they are scared. Scared of what waits beyond death. So, don't think ending your own life will save you! It simply ends. It E-N-D-S. Suicide is the act of killing yourself, and dying without comprehending the meaning of death is but escaping from reality. Although the result is the same in both cases. All right, come on. Try to kill yourself if you can; try to kill yourself now that you've learned the truth."

At the very least, I couldn't kill myself.

After all, the only reason why I'm here now is because I'm more afraid of death than most.

Ah, right, there was a nice little twist to this story:

"Actually, I heard Kimura left behind a suicide note," Yuuji tells me.

"A suicide note? Did he apologize to Saito or something?"

"Exactly."

"Well, that should cheer her up a little, I guess?"

"No, I think it'll have quite the opposite effect."

"Hm...? Well, sure, I wouldn't want anyone to commit suicide because of me either."

"That's not the problem," he objects.

"What do you mean?"

“Kimura got her name wrong.”

Oh.

After school ended (classes did take place, but everyone was somewhat absent in mind) I headed to the shopping district where I had come across Reina Kamisu.

There’s no guarantee that I will find her again just because I saw her once, but that’s the only clue I have. I originally thought I would be able to get my hands on some data since I’m the victim of the incident, but it’s not that simple. Especially for juvenile crimes.

Should Reina Kamisu walk past me, I won’t miss her. That’s not only because I’ve carved her appearance into my memory over and over: She is special in anyone’s eyes. She is absurdly beautiful.

“...”

However, an event-less hour passed. Having stood all the while because there was no place to sit, my legs got a bit tired. I decided to tolerate moving away from this place a bit and went to the next McDonalds, grabbed myself two burgers (everything else is too expensive for the purse of a middle school student) and sat down by the window.

While munching at my burger, I start thinking about Reina Kamisu.

Reina Kamisu. Back when the incident happened, she was 16 years old (meaning that she was only one year older than I am now), so her present age should be 21.

Did she get a job? Maybe she's enrolled in an university. She probably couldn't graduate from high school because of everything she did, but she should be smart enough to make it through the entrance exams of an university. Even though she killed my entire family, she was hardly punished at all because her completely incomprehensible motive got her diagnosed "mentally unstable". I bet now she's worshiped like an idol at her workplace or at university. The murderous idol. Haha, what a catchphrase!

"Tch...!"

The wound in my chest starts to pain. According to Dr. Mihara, this pain is just a product of my mind since the wound has already healed.

Dammit! You think this is only mental? An illusion? Don't mess with me, Doc! This pain isn't fake; no way it is!

The wound *is* bleeding. I may be the only one who can see the blood, but it's definitely blood—and I'm the liquid (or something similar to a liquid).

Ah, damn, I know! I'm not making sense. I'm just digging a hole for myself.

But as a matter of fact—the wound hasn't healed. And it still hurts.

The perceptive faculties of a human have a certain capacity; our brains are like computers and can only process up to a certain amount of data. When there is an overflow of information, they stop working correctly and start churning out error messages.

The sight before my eyes deprives me of any emotional impulse.

There is a corpse; my mom's corpse. There is a corpse; my dad's corpse. There is a corpse; my sister's corpse. The floor is covered by a pool of blood. Whoa, how am I supposed to walk on a floor that's so drenched? No, that's not the problem here, is it? Whoa-whoa, they're dead, no? You gotta be kidding me. This isn't some TV drama. Such brutal deaths do not happen around me. That being said, this looks pretty real. Haha, hey, this is getting out of hand. I can't believe it. And what's with that girl there? Who the fuck is that incredibly pretty girl? What's with that knife—that blood-drenched knife—she's carrying? Whoa-whoa-whoa-whoa! It was YOU? Despite that pretty face of yours? Hold on a sec! Don't mess with me! Who allowed you to kill my family? Who are you, anyway? Who are you?! Who the fuck are you?!

“As I thought...”

What's *as you thought*?! You're strange! You're nuts!
“People die when you stab them.”

Of course they do. Every child knows that. Everyone knows that, although no one actually verifies it.

Right. My family died.

Died?

Yeah, they died...right?

They died. Yeah, they died. D-I-E-D.

“A...ah...” I finally start to moan.

They’re lying on the floor. My mom, my dad, my sister, they’re all lying on the floor, inanimate. I was watching TV until a few moments ago. I went upstairs because they got angry with me because I’d kicked my sister. Has that become a scene of the past? Has that girl stolen it from me? Is that even possible? Can she even do that?

“Do you want to die, too?”

She can. That girl can do it.

“Uh...UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!”

Help me help me help me! HELP ME, mom! Ah, she’s dead! Anyone! Anyone help me!

I fall on my rear and crawl backward, literally wetting my pants. Of course I can’t escape like this, but I can’t stand up either.

She draws closer.

“S-Stop it...”

However, my words fall on deaf ears. Aiming the knife at me, she draws closer.

And then she wields it.

“Stop it! STOOOOOOOP!”

And then I wake up like always.

I let out a sigh as I sip my miso soup.

“My, Atsuhi, why are you sighing when the day has only started?” my aunt reproaches me lightly with a smile and puts a plate with a fried egg before me.

“I had that dream again...” I answer as I put some soy sauce on the egg.

“I see. They’ve become frequent lately.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh dear...why does that girl have a grudge against you?”

A grudge. Had her motive been so simple and reasonable, I wouldn’t be as broken as I am now.

“Maybe you’re a little antsy because your admission exams are just around the corner?” she says in an unusual worried tone. She’s worried; in other words, I’m worrying her.

This is bad. I mustn’t worry her even more when she’s already worried about my being under mental treatment.

“Ahaha, but I haven’t even started studying?” I laugh as I hold my chest.

“You haven’t? I think that’s pretty problematic, too!”

When my aunt said so, I could read the words “thank god my fears were groundless” from her face.

Groundless fears. Right, her fears should have been groundless.

However, it is a fact that the dream has unsettled me more than it would usually do.

I started having that nightmare after that incident happened. During the first month, I was tormented by it every night, and every time I was, I was so unsettled that I could not eat anything.

But you get used to any nightmare with time: lately, I would only think of it as a “bad dream.”

However, today it’s different. Not only did she wound me in my dream, she also wounded me in reality again.

I hold my chest.

My nightmare has leaked into reality and is attacking me from there. That’s all because I’ve run across Reina Kamisu the other day. That nightmare isn’t just a nightmare; it’s my past that keeps tormenting me.

By coming across Reina Kamisu, my nightmare has acquired reality. She is using it as a portal to attack me.

Again and again, she will attack me.

Now, how long will my heart be able to endure it?

I enter the classroom, just to get surprised almost as much as yesterday.

Ashizawa had his head shaved, abandoning his long, brown hair.

I doubt that one of the teachers in charge of common decency forced him to do that; they wouldn’t go that far. It must have been his own will.

Ashizawa has been in low spirits lately, which is, needless to say, because he is blaming himself for Saito's death. Back when the wallet he gave to Mizuhara was damaged, he got so angry with Saito that he pushed her into a corner and intimidated her.

I was there when it happened and observed them, planning to step in if he were to get rough...no, I don't know if I really intended to intervene. Perhaps, I only pretended to be worried about her. Anyway, I observed them without doing anything.

Only after looking at Ashizawa's shaved head, my conscience starts to prickle me.

I don't know how much that incident took part in Saito's death, but I'm sure that it did have an effect. It's another aspect that drove her into suicide.

But what if there'd been someone who tried to help Saito when she was surrounded by Ashizawa and his pals? What if she'd had a comrade who didn't care about the pressure Ashizawa applied? Wouldn't the outcome have been different? Aren't we, who hesitated to stand up for Saito, the real sinners?

That "comrade" could have been me.

Ashizawa has inflicted an evident punishment upon himself like a real delinquent. As thoughtless and pointless as that punishment may be, he did produce proof of his remorse.

And what about us? We're denying any responsibility and try to discount the matter with some pity. It's not Ashizawa or Kimura or Mizuhara who cornered Saito, but us who tried to stay away from her to the bitter end.

Suddenly, a question crosses my mind.

Come to think of it—

Didn't Saito call someone's name for help?

Even the lunch break was occupied with the subject of Saito and Kimura because Ashizawa's shaved head was so eye-catching. Because of the great sympathy for Saito that fills the air (they all seem to feel guilty), Takatsuki and her colleagues are in an awkward position, being the ones who blamed Saito.

I have eaten up my boxed lunch and am observing my class, my elbow rested on my desk.

Ashizawa looks like a monk, and Takatsuki's group are looking like cats in an unfamiliar house. Wondering how Mizuhara herself is doing, I look at her.

Her fairly pretty face looks even more exhausted than before. She must be aware of the central part she has played in both Saito's and Kimura's suicide.

As I make this observation, she turns to me and our eyes meet.

I quickly avert my gaze to feign ignorance, but her gaze remains fixed on me. "Never mind me!" I shout in my mind as I confirm that I'm still being watched.

However, my silent shout remained unheard; she stands up and walks toward my seat.

“Kogure-kun.”

Now she called my name. Looks like it wasn’t a coincidence or because she noticed my gaze that she looked at me.

“So...What’s the matter, Mizuhara?” I ask as I raise my head, visibly annoyed.

“You’re smart, aren’t you? I mean, you’re always the number one in this class and you are among the best in our school year, right?”

“You’re talking about my grades, but there’s a difference between being smart and having good grades.”

Mizuhara is dumbstruck for a moment, but eventually picks up again, “...But you’re the only one I can think of to talk about this. Can you spare me a moment, please?”

“I think there are enough other people who could give you better advice.”

“Mmm...I’m not exactly looking for advice. Let’s not talk about it here—come this way.”

Mizuhara pulls me by my sleeve. Looks like she insists on talking with me.

“Whoa, hold your horses, now. Ashizawa’s going to get angry when he sees us together.”

“He won’t.”

“Oh, really? He must be quite forgiving then.”

“No, we’ve...split up.”

Surprised, I freeze for an instant.

“Ah...I see,” I say in a deliberately disinterested voice, but my expression just now has given me away.

But now that I think about it, there’s nothing to be so surprised about. While the love experienced in middle school might be blind and grand, it’s also transitory. Their bonds weren’t strong enough to withstand the obstacles brought upon them—that’s all.

And those bonds ruined Kimura.

Oh well.

Mizuhara led me to the stairway landing before the door to the roof. These stairs are hardly used, so there probably won’t be any uninvited visitors. She must have used this place to secretly meet up with Ashizawa.

“We came here from time to time. Toshiki and I.”

There you have it.

“You...you know about the fake love letter I teased Saito-san with, right?” she asks.

“Yeah.”

“Did you ever wonder why I did that?”

“Nope, not at all? I assumed that you simply couldn’t stand Saito, and I don’t think there’s a deeper reason to find there.”

“Perhaps...that’s true...but I, I also wanted to help—”

“I don’t care. Spare me that story.”

That’s just an excuse she made up.

“No, hear me out! To tell the truth...we once saw her when we met up here.”

“Really...? What kind of business did Saito have here?”

“That’s the problem...she was mumbling things to herself.”

“To herself?”

“Yes, to herself, but as if talking with someone. I tried following her glance a few times, but there was no one there.”

That’s not *that* noteworthy; Saito had no one to talk with, so it makes sense that she would vent her desire to talk when she was alone.

“And you found that to be creepy, so you teased her?” I conclude.

“I did think it was creepy, that’s true...”

I see. I can understand that Mizuhara would want to intervene after coming across such a scene.

“So? That’s not why you brought me here, is it?”

“No...” She hesitates for a moment. “Kogure-kun...do you believe in ghosts?”

The conversation takes a sudden turn.

“Ghosts? No idea. Well, I do think they might exist, since so many people claim that they do...”

“How about evil spirits?”

“Bullshit.”

Wait, wait, why does Mizuhara ask things like that? What’s the meaning behind those absurd questions?

—Whoa-whoa, is she implying that Saito was talking with a ghost? Time to come down to earth, no?

I barely manage to hold my thoughts in.

...No, don't jump to conclusions. Mizuhara said she was put off by the sight of Saito talking to herself. She wouldn't have felt disgust if that ghost-story was her first impression, but something like fear or maybe even envy, right?

Does that mean that there is something that made her come to the conclusion that Saito was talking with a ghost?

"You're implying that Saito was talking to a ghost?"
Mizuhara nods.

"How did you arrive at that thought?"

Mizuhara lapses into silence. It seems like she fears that by putting her thoughts into words, she will make them definite.

However, she opens her mouth at last.

"Because..." she mutters something, "...died..."

"Because Saito died? How does that explain anything?"

"No!" Mizuhara objects.

"What? She talked with a ghost and that's why she died? That makes no—"

"That's not it! Not because Saito-san died!"

"But who—"

I think. No, there's no need to think. There's only one other person that comes into question.

"Not Saito-san, but because Kimura-kun died."

I have to admit that I'm a little confused.

This doesn't make sense. Not only does she suggest the existence of something unscientific like ghosts, she is also talking back and forth incoherently.

I carefully sort everything in my head, thinking every point through logically, and arrive at the conclusion surprisingly fast.

"So...you saw him, right?"

She nods slowly.

"You saw Saito talking with that something, which by itself would have simply made her an oddball. But you also saw Kimura do the same thing."

Mizuhara nods.

I pause and take a look around. Should ghosts really exist, then I wouldn't be surprised to find one here. That thought sends a cold shiver down my spine, but of course that's just my imagination playing tricks on me.

However, as a matter of fact, someone died on the other side of this door.

"Do you...do you think such a coincidence is possible?" Mizuhara asks reluctantly.

"What do you refer to when you say 'coincidence'...?"

"Like I said... Saito-san and Kimura-kun, they both talked to a ghost, they both saw a ghost, and they both committed suicide. Do you think that such a coincidence is possible?"

Coincidence.

She's right; this would be a strange coincidence. However, not only did they have a proper reason for suicide, there's also no doubt that they ended their lives of their own free will.

To begin with, there is causal relation between their deaths: Kimura wouldn't have died if not for Saito's death. Their deaths aren't caused by a coincidence.

Hold on...

There is no place for a coincidence there. In other words, it's the absence of a coincidence that makes that *whatever* suspicious.

"You have doubts, too, don't you, Kogure-kun?" Mizuhara points out. I quickly hide my expression. "Know what I think?" she asks, "I think that neither of them actually committed suicide."

Her face is as pale as clay. At last, I realize that it's not feelings of guilt that have exhausted her so much.

Mizuhara is scared.

The fear of *whatever* drove the other two into death is wearing her down.

"They were killed," she says with fearful conviction, "A ghost cursed them to death."

Like yesterday, I began looking out for Reina Kamisu while drinking a discounted milkshake at a McDonalds.

However, while my eyes were directed at the window, nearly all of my internal wires were used up for thought.

I had since been recalling that discussion with Mizuhara several times, trying to draw my own conclusions.

I have no means of knowing what that *whatever* she was calling a “ghost” is, but granted that that “phenomenon” is capable of communication, it can get into contact with others and thus affect their lives to a certain degree.

That effect killed those two?

Cursed to death.

Well, perhaps you can call that a “curse” of sorts.

But is it so easy to lead someone to death? No way. No matter how light you make of life and death, everyone knows that death is final and unrecoverable. People’s words do not kill you; it’s your own voice within that leads you there. Or an abrupt impulse. At any rate, people don’t die that easily.

Or does it, *whatever it is*, have the power to manipulate these mechanisms with ease?

On the other hand...they both had a valid reason for suicide. While words are useless against your average Joe, it might well be possible to give someone with suicidal tendencies the final push.

However, I shake my head.

I’m losing touch with reality; I should think it through more rationally.

Rational thinking. R-a-t-i-o-n-a-l. Got that down?
...Yeah.

Right... first of all, I should consider the possibility that everything Mizuhara told me was just a product of her imagination. In my personal view, she is an opinionated girl.

She knows that she shares the guilt for Saito and Kimura's death. Perhaps, she was unable to take the blame and therefore tried to escape by reading a reason into Kimura's talking with air, which in turn she made up either from scratch or by misinterpreting a normal conversation to her own convenience.

In other words, that *being* does not exist to begin with.

How's that? Doesn't that make much more sense?

...Tch. What a pathetic attempt to push reason into this affair.

Unconvinced by my own reasoning, I try to focus on the other side of the window and end up scaring a few pedestrians with a piercing glare.

“What are you looking at so hard?” someone asks from behind me.

I am about to kindly explain that I am looking for someone—

—But my words get stuck in my throat and are pushed back down until they evaporate entirely.

My skin crawls.

Something drips down from my finger tips as my mouth turns into a desert and my eyeballs are exposed to the air.

“—Ah.”

I know...

I know that voice.

Even though I have only heard it a few times, it has burnt itself deep into my brain and won't leave me ever since.

"What's wrong? Won't you tell me what you're looking at?"

It pains.

The wound in my chest pains.

Fully opened again, it overflows with a liquid resembling blood —as if to react to its creator.

I mustn't, lose.

I hold my chest and turn around to the visitor with an iron will.

Something pierces through my eyes as I recognize her face, making me fight against the urge to close my eyes, to avert my eyes.

However, I have been waiting for this very moment.

I must stand my ground now.

"I was looking for you, Reina Kamisu, for you!"

I scowl at Reina Kamisu. The more I sharpen my gaze, the weaker the pain in my chest gets.

"Oh really?" she smiles at me with a smile so beautiful that it looks fake. "And what are you going to do now? Take revenge?"

Revenge, says Reina Kamisu with indifference.

"I do want to do that, yeah," I reply as calmly as I can, while suppressing the boiling rage.

"So there's another goal if you phrase it like that?"

“Yes.”

“I’m listening?”

“Maybe you think that incident is just water under the bridge. But not for me. I’m still suffering the consequences everyday. You’re still messing with my life!”

“Well, I suppose nobody who fell victim to such an incident could come to terms with it so easily,” Reina Kamisu says in an indifferent voice, giving me the urge to charge at her and strangle her to death. However, I must keep from doing so; without her I will never get the answer I seek.

“And? What do you want from me?”

Reina Kamisu shows no signs of guilt. Is she really that blunt or is she acting like that on purpose? I can’t quite decide between the two possibilities.

Before it’s too late, I erase my anger, which is on the verge of bursting; yes, I don’t suppress it, I erase it. I wouldn’t last for much longer otherwise. I try to shut out every impression I have of Reina Kamisu.

“—I want to learn the truth,” I squeeze out.

“The truth?”

“Yes. The reason why you killed my family.”

Finding that reason is the number one priority for me.

I want to move on from my current state of mind. But in order to fight off those ever-lasting feelings of sorrow, fear, despair, and anger, I have to break through a wall.

The wall of questions.

Once ignited, hatred doesn't just go away; there is a need to go out of one's way and erase it. In the process of doing so, however, questions left unanswered constitute a great obstacle. I might be able to stomach this matter somehow given a reason or something to satisfy myself, but as a matter of fact, I don't even have enough data to make up one myself. My questions have so far been left unanswered.

Because of that, I have no means of digesting these various dark feelings within.

However, unable to understand my circumstances, Reina Kamisu inclines her head:

“Is there a point in learning about that?”

“There is. That’s why I’m asking.”

“You think so...? I can’t seem to see one.”

“I don’t give a fuck about your opinion! I’m asking you a question here! Do you even have the faintest idea how much of ‘myself’ you already extracted from me?! You owe me some goddamn cooperation!” I yell unwittingly. Crap, I failed to stifle my anger. Even the smallest opening in my guard won’t go unnoticed by my anger.

Hold it back, hold it back, hold it back.

“You changed your attitude,” she notes with unchanged indifference. “Listen, I’m not trying to tease you. I would love to give you an answer, I really do. But as much as I would like to do so, I can’t.”

“—Why?!”

“Because there is no answer that could satisfy you.”

“Well...that might be true. My family won’t come back, and I won’t be happy no matter what you say. But...that’s not why I’m asking. I’m perfectly aware of that!”

“No, that’s not what I meant.”

“Then what is it that you mean...?!”

“You want me to tell you the reason why I did what I did, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Hm...”

“Believe it or not, I do understand that you have an entirely different way of thinking than me. It can’t be helped if your reason doesn’t make sense to me. I don’t care. Anything’s better than knowing nothing.”

For the first time, Reina Kamisu listened closely to my words.

She gazes at me, trying to understand my circumstances, trying to understand the meaning behind my words.

I breathe out in relief. Reina Kamisu isn’t stupid, nor does she hold a grudge against me. Therefore, it doesn’t come as a surprise that I expect her to give me the answer I was waiting for.

However—

“And still...” she sighs for some reason.

“...What?”

“I still don’t have the answer you’re looking for.”

My eyes widen.

“C-Cut it out already! Don’t give me that you had no reason to kill! There must have been some kind of motive, no matter how mad!”

“A reason? Yes, maybe there was one upon closer examination.”

“...Upon closer examination?”

“But I never really got it.”

She... didn’t get it?

“You’re not going to find a nice explanation for everything in the world, and the same goes for the murder I committed; or was that already enough to satisfy you?”

“O-Of course not!”

“I should have known.”

“You don’t know the reason yourself? Don’t give me that! Or do you mean that you killed people just like... like drinking water?!”

“Of course not. And just so you know: It’s not like I don’t remember how I felt back then. I felt... an impulse. I had to kill someone. I had to confirm if people could really die through my hands. I had no other choice but to do so.

I don’t know, however, where that impulse came from. I do think there would be a reason upon further examination, but I didn’t find one in the end. Why do we drink water? Because we become thirsty; because we would die otherwise. But...why were we designed to die unless we drink water in the first place? I don’t know. Why did I get the urge to kill? I don’t know.”

In other words... my attempt to understand Reina Kamisu and her reasons for killing my family can't possibly succeed—because she doesn't understand herself, either.

I'm not going to find the answer I'm looking for anywhere in the world.

“It breaks my heart to say this, but as I said earlier...”

“There is no point in learning the truth.”

My wound opens.

No, a wound that hasn't healed in the first place doesn't “open.”

“One more thing,” she says.

It hurts.

“You mentioned that you don't consider that incident a matter of the past, right?”

Damn, it hurts.

“I think I know why that is.”

It hurts, damn, it hurts!

“You seem to think that I only killed your family, but that's wrong.”

Ah, I see.

That's why my wound isn't healing; because she has destroyed my ability to regenerate.

“I must have also killed you!”

Right—I am already dead.

4

I mustn't worry my aunt. And yet...I have been skipping school for the past few days, unable to move a muscle.

I'm dead.

Needless to say, that's a figure of speech; from a biological perspective, I'm perfectly alive and capable of thought.

However—there is a wound in my chest that is linked to the past. As long as I have this wound, I will keep being taken back to that day and being harmed by Reina Kamisu.

Reina Kamisu will keep carving up everything I have—my happiness, sadness, qualms, dreams—tread on it, nullify it.

The only thing that remains to me are the feelings of that incident. Feelings that will give me no rest wherever I go and however long I wait.

Therefore, I'm chained to one place, forbidden to move toward the future.

Therefore, my life has come to a halt.

Therefore, you can say that I am “dead.”

...Fuck.

I completely lost to Reina Kamisu.

How am I supposed to live on now? What am I supposed to do? Do I have to continue to live for year after year together with that pain in my chest?

How could I answer that?

No...not quite.

How could I decide over that?

I'm in the midst of a vortex of worthless thought that, even though it's worthless, tries to suck me in.

Suddenly, however:

"Atsushi? I'm coming in!" a voice says and drags me back into reality.

"Okay..."

After hearing my reply, my aunt enters the room carrying a tray with a bowl of rice porridge on it.

My guilt pangs get stronger. I'm pretending to be ill and hiding the real reason for my absence; I don't want to worry my aunt by telling her that it's really a mental problem.

"Does your head still hurt?" she asks after she puts the tray on my desk.

"Yeah..."

My conscience pricks me; I'm lying to her.

...I have no other choice. I'm sorry, but I have no other choice.

"Do you really think you're okay? It's already been 3 days and counting. Do you want me to take you to the hospital?"

"I'm fine."

She gazes silently at my face for a few moments, and finally nods with a gentle smile.

Her smile sparks a faint assumption within me:
Maybe she has long since seen through my lie, and is just turning a blind eye on me because she's powerless?

“Atsushi? It’s Wednesday today, do you remember?”

“Mm...ah.”

“Do you want to cancel this week’s appointment with your doctor? I can contact him if you want.”

Normally, it’s these times when one should look for mental counseling, but since I’m pretending to be ill, I mustn’t get caught.

“Yes, please. Can I ask you to contact him, mom?”

Just before I finish speaking, her eyes widen.

Surprised by her reaction, I recall my own words.

Ah... I just called my aunt “mom.”

Unsure how to deal with this awkward situation, I wordlessly gaze at her. Her surprised face slowly turns back into the familiar gentle smile.

“You finally said it,” she smiles with a hint of joy.

“That was...that was just a mistake.”

“I don’t mind, Atsushi. In that case, I will just take it that you like me so much that you mistook me for your mother for an instant.”

Is that so...?

Sure, I’m grateful of her—I really am—but isn’t that itself proof that we’re not a real family? If I were her real son, I wouldn’t probably be that grateful. I would consider the love she’d give me a perfectly natural thing. I would just take her love and do nothing in return.

However, if I told my aunt that now, I would only sadden her.

Keeping my opinion to myself, I ask her something else instead.

“Can I call you *mom* from now on, then?”

“Of course you can! You’re our son, Atsushi! My husband may seem cold to you, but he feels really attached to you, too.”

“Yeah, I know.”

I’m a child. As such, I cost a lot of money. On top of that, I will cost even more once I’ve completed my compulsory education and enter a high school. Despite all that, my uncle has not made a single complaint.

“There’s nothing to worry about. We’re even acknowledged as your parents by the law.”

“Yeah...”

“Can you...can you call me again?”

“Huh?”

“Quick!”

Fighting off the awkwardness, I say, “Mom.”

My aunt nods happily.

Mom.

Yes, I feel averse to calling her that way.

Because I’m used to calling her *aunt*? Sure, but there is more to the reluctance I’m feeling.

Why is that? Why?

Besides, I’ve long known that she wanted me to call her *mom*, that she didn’t like the word *aunt* because it put some distance between us.

I've always been grateful of her, and wanted to make her happy if possible. If I can make her happy with something as simple as changing the way I address her, I would do that anytime without a second thought.

Then why is it that I have kept calling her aunt to this day?

“I have a question, mom.”

“Yes?”

“Have you—” I break off in mid-sentence. There's no return once I have said the continuation of these words.

No...I have noticed already, so I can't return anyway.

“—Have you ever heard of Reina Kamisu?”

I'm sitting on the sofa inside Dr. Mihara's office.

As high as hiding my true reason for staying home was in my list of priorities, I don't care much anymore. I need the counseling. More precisely, I need to talk with Dr. Mihara.

“Hello Atsushi-kun,” he says to me as he enters the room.

“Hello,” I reply.

He sits down in the seat opposite of me.

“So,” he cites the usual phrase, “how have you been?”
I have already prepared an answer to that question.

“A lot happened.”

“Oh? Would you mind telling me?”

“Sure, that's why I'm here.”

“True,” he nods. Because he is a psychotherapist, it is very hard to read his true thoughts from his expression, but I can tell that he has noticed that something in me changed.

“Firstly, I had a dream.”

“Oh? What kind of dream?”

He often asks me to tell him about my dreams. I guess he’s trying to analyze them and search the depths of my consciousness.

“A dream where I get killed by Reina Kamisu.”

Dr. Mihara closely observes my face as I speak, while I observe his, trying to take note of every change.

“Which means that it’s that dream in which a girl kills you, right? With a kitchen knife?”

“Yes. Also, doctor, her name is Reina Kamisu.”

Gazing closely at me, he replies, “I see.”

“Doctor.”

“Yes?”

“I have had that dream for a while now, right?”

After giving it some thought, he nods, “That’s right.”

“It’s not hard to see why I would have such a dream: because I haven’t come to terms with that incident yet. Correct?”

It seems that I have knocked him somewhat out of his stride.

During all the years of coming here, I have noticed that he never gives me answers. He only listens to me. He tries to help me find an answer myself by listening.

That's all he really does. There have been times when I was annoyed by that, but I guess that's just how psychotherapy works.

It must be troublesome from his perspective to be urged to state his own thoughts.

“...I think so,” he says, however, after coming to the conclusion that there will be no harm in doing so.

“Is that all?” I ask.

“...All?”

“Is that all of your view on that dream?”

He grumbles deeply and averts his eyes from me. After remaining silent like that for a few seconds, he looks at me again and opens his mouth.

“Atsushi-kun. It is true that I have reflected on your dream and formed my own opinion. That is, however, my personal view and in no way perfect. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“The problem is, Atsushi-kun, that by disclosing my opinion, I might affect *your own* opinion. You might accidentally confuse my answer as yours. Do you understand the problem that I'm pointing out?”

“Yes. That means that there is no problem if I state my own opinion, right?”

“...I suppose so.”

“Fine. I think that my dream is the result of my wish to 'escape.'”

“...” He remains silent.

“Let me change the topic a little. I would like to tell you something entirely else that happened this week.”

“Go ahead.”

“I came across Reina Kamisu again.”

“...I see. Just to be sure: we are not talking about that dream here anymore, is that correct?”

“Yes, of course not. This time we didn’t only pass by each other, we also talked.”

“...”

“Don’t you want to know what we talked about?”

“...Yes, please.”

“I felt the need to know the reason she killed my family. And that’s what I asked her.”

“What...what did she reply?”

“She told me that she had no idea.”

“Hm...”

“I’m quite sure that she didn’t lie to me. Reina Kamisu had a murderous impulse and killed my family. However, there was no deeper reason beside that impulse. At the very least, that’s what she seems to think.”

Dr. Mihara maintains his silence, unsure how to react.

“I wanted to put an end to that incident by learning about her reasons. I wanted to get a hold of something that could help me come to terms. Yet, my hopes were betrayed. Instead, I will now be forever held captive by my past.

—However, there is something I noticed earlier. Even if, just hypothetically, she had had a proper reason for the murder she committed, I wouldn't have accepted that reason no matter what. I didn't stand a chance against Reina Kamisu from the very start. Because it's plain impossible to pacify the feelings of someone whose family was murdered."

He is still gazing at me. At last, he reluctantly begins to speak. "Say, Atsushi-kun, where did you meet her?"

"At the McDonalds near the station. In real life, of course."

With folded arms, he lapses into silence again. Having said everything I wanted to say, I also keep quiet.

Silence. For a while, only meaningless noises reach my ears, like the noise of traffic and the clicking of a clock.

I shall wait for his next words—whatever they may be.

At last, he unfolds his arms and looks deep into my eyes.

"Atsushi-kun... may I ask you a question?" Dr. Mihara asks.

"Sure."

"Earlier, you mentioned that you see your wish to escape in that dream, right?"

"Right."

"Furthermore, you continually emphasized that you met her in *real life*, right?"

"Right."

“You already know the real answer, don’t you, Atsushi-kun? Despite that, you asked me that, is that right?”

“...”

“Okay, Atsushi-kun. Let me confirm this once again.”

“...Confirm what?”

“It was a coldblooded murderer who killed your family. What’s her name again? Rehna Kamizu?”

“Right. Reina Kamisu. Reina Kamisu slaughtered my family!” I utter agitatedly, confusing the doctor a little.

He remains calm, however, and responds to me, “However—”

“That person does not exist.”

While I did expect that answer, it still comes as a shock. My hypothesis proved correct. And as I already knew beforehand, as such it will aggravate my pain.

“That’s not true!” I deny. I must.

“Why do you still say that?! You are escaping! That’s wrong and you know it!”

“No... that’s not true! I know that, I know for a fact that she does exist!”

That’s no lie. At least, I don’t think it’s one.

“Atsushi-kun...”

“Reina Kamisu exists! She’s **here** with us!” I shout.

I have to make sure of it.

Leaving a perplexed Dr. Mihara behind, I turn around and dash out of his office. As I leave the room, I bump into a girl who was waiting for her turn, and tumble over. I jump to my feet, however, and without a word of apology, I head to the place where I can make sure of Reina Kamisu's existence.

While I've never actually been there, I know the address. As I keep running toward that address, I try to regain a cool head. I will need it to confirm the fact I'm seeking, and I should be able to, since I already proved myself by suppressing my anger while talking to Reina Kamisu.

Calm down. First of all, slow down a little. Running your heart out isn't going to change anything; your fate stays all the same.

At last, I manage to regain my composure—just when I arrived at my destination, as chance would have it.

I ring the chime.

“Yes?” someone says after a few moments.

“Urm... my name is Atsushi Kogure. Ah, yes... I'm a classmate of Kyouhei-kun's.” As I explain who I am, I look at the nameplate besides the chime.

The plate reads *Kimura*.

With the meekest expression I can play, I pray at Kimura's altar, since that's what I told his mother I am here for. I must make her believe that we were good buddies. She won't be able to tell unless he previously told her in detail about me.

"It was a... real shock...", I explain to her with a sad face.

I then ramble on about how much I'm supposedly grieved about Kimura's death. It's not that hard: I just have to exaggerate my own feelings, since it's for a fact that I was, as a classmate, shocked by his sudden passing away. His mother nods at my words, a few tears in her eyes. The queasy conscience I get is immediately wiped out in the face of my goal.

"In fact, Mrs. Kimura, I'm here today with a request," I say, finally coming down to business.

"...Yes?"

"I want to know what Kimura-kun thought about in his last hours, what were his worries, and I would like to hear his own, true words. Therefore, may I—"

The odds are for me. For one thing, there have been others who have seen it, otherwise there wouldn't be any rumors, and she doesn't seem to have noticed that I'm deceiving her. I don't see why she would refuse.

"—may I read his suicide note?"

5

I started to wander around aimlessly after I had left Kimura's home.

Everything was a lie, the truth, and cruel reality.

The past, the here and now, and the future exist all **here** simultaneously, and all of them turned out to be tormenting me.

My wound aggravates even more.

It hurts.

But there's no blood to spill anymore—there's not a single drop left.

I've dwindled. Entirely.

I'm dried up like dust, and what little is left of me could easily be wiped away.

As I look up at the colorful, dazzling sky, I recall Kimura's suicide note.

"Mother, father, and all who have known me: please forgive me for leaving so soon.

Now that I hold my pen, I don't know what to write anymore. Even though I pondered quite a while about it before.

For starters, let me write why I killed myself.

It was not until I troubled a certain girl and drove her into suicide that I decided in the real sense to commit suicide myself.

I will not write the details of what I did to her. Every time I call back the memories, my heart feels like a rag being squeezed out.

While that event was the last straw, however, I had been thinking of suicide before.

There is no meaning in my life.

No one needs me and no one ever will, although I'm sure you will all deny it.

But in the end, I still think that it all boils down to the fact that I'm worthless. It may be a bad simile, but I think I'm somewhat like your favorite pencil: it hurts a bit if it goes lost, but you can easily buy a new one in the supermarket around the corner.

That's why I think that the only way I can atone for driving someone into suicide is to end my own worthless life as well.

You were kind-hearted. We talked, even though you were already dead. Maybe I was just having an illusion, but you forgave me.

And that's exactly why I have to punish myself.

I have to atone for the sin of tormenting someone as kind and forgiving as you.

Let me apologize once more for what I did.

I am awfully sorry, — "

I reread these words over and over, but they didn't change no matter how many times and from what angle I read them.

“I am awfully sorry, Reina Kamisu-san.”

I recall what Mizuhara said to me.

“A ghost cursed them to death.”

And then I finally recall whose name Saito called for help.

At last, I found myself at the place where I’d first seen her—the shopping district by the station. As I lean against the wall, I decide to wait for her.

There’s no guarantee that she will appear, but I have a hunch that she will if I keep waiting.

I search my pockets and take out the envelope I have stuffed in there before I dashed out of my home.

Why didn’t I call my aunt *mom*?

In fact, there is no problem with that in itself. The problem is that I would consequently have to call my uncle *dad* as well, since I can’t just change one side and leave the other as is. Needless to say, the reason why I don’t want to call him that way is *not* because I don’t like him as much as I like my aunt.

I look at the envelope.

It’s addressed at “Atsushi Kogure,” while the sender is written to be “Takashi Kogure” on the backside. Right, that’s the name of my dad.

And the postmark’s date is the tenth of last month.

“Were you looking for me again?”

I raise my head and couldn't contain a smile. I am looking at a smile that is as absurdly beautiful as ever.

"Exactly!" I reply.

"What do you want?"

"I want to confirm something. And I have a request."

"Okay, ask away and make sure of whatever that is."

I stuff the envelope in my pocket again and ask, "It was you who killed my family, right?"

"That's right."

"It was also you who killed my father, right?"

"Obviously."

"Which means that it can't have been my father who killed my family, right?"

Reina Kamisu's eyes widen in surprise. And with absolute certainty, she replies:

"Of course it wasn't him."

I look closely at her. Naturally, there's no sign of deception to be found in her face.

"Would you mind... listening to my silly musings for a moment?" I ask her.

"Go ahead."

"Let's pretend for a moment that not you but my father killed my family," I start.

"Now that's a bizarre thought."

"His motive for attacking us wouldn't be something as incomprehensible as yours, I'm sure, but something clear. Something clichéd like, for example, financial difficulties that made him attempt to commit family suicide."

“It’s a shame that it wasn’t him.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you wanted a reason, didn’t you? You’d have one in that case, no?”

Indeed, I wanted one. However—

“I don’t care.”

I don’t care. I don’t think I would want to know the reason if it were such a cheap one. I wouldn’t want to learn that our family was destroyed by a foolish thing like that.

If that hypothesis were true, I’d certainly wish—

—that that reason didn’t exist in the first place.

I would certainly try to ignore the truth right before my eyes, and seek refuge in my dreams. I would make one up where someone else murders my family. Someone who’s a monster and doesn’t have a proper reason to kill.

Someone like—the beautiful girl here.

However, no matter how fake the culprit is—

“—I don’t care. The fact that my family was killed won’t change, no matter who was the culprit. After all, it’s impossible to pacify the feelings of someone whose family was murdered, and my wound will never heal up. Right?”

Reina Kamisu gazes closely at me.

“Perhaps,” she finally answers.

“You said it. Then what is it that I would seek? Let me tell you: a resting place, where I wouldn’t be wounded, where I wouldn’t have to suffer anymore. I would definitely seek a place to rest like that,” I say and look into her eyes.

“—So?”

“Hm?”

“You’re done confirming, aren’t you? So what’s the other thing you wanted; what’s your request?” she asks and I reply with a natural smile.

Ah, she acts just like I wanted.

What I needed was a culprit with no reason to kill. But that’s not all. That’s not enough to give me peace of mind.

What I really need is—a coldblooded murderer.

A murderer like Reina Kamisu.

Therefore, I ask from her:

“—Please, kill me.”

That moment, my wound turned into a scar.

The pain went away and the blood stopped. What remains is a plain scar that looks a bit repulsive until you’ve gotten used to it.

But that’s just an illusion; I can’t exist without that pain. I have to drag along my past and live with it and the pain. As soon as I stop fantasizing about being killed by Reina Kamisu, the scar will turn back into a fresh wound.

“Why do you ask *me*? Just die by yourself.”

“That’s out of question. I can’t commit suicide. My fear of death is barely strong enough to keep me from doing that.”

“Hmm...? Barely strong enough, hm?” she emphasizes part of what I said.

Right, I can’t end my own life because I’m able to see how horrifying it is to die.

But what if—what if someone killed me?

If I were to be killed forcibly, I would not have the time to mull over about death. At most, I would realize the fact that I would disappear from this world. Or perhaps, the pain wouldn’t grant me any thought at all. The prominent kind of feeling I would have at that moment would be—relief.

I’ve always been wishing from the bottom of my heart for someone to erase me.

“Just in case,” I say to her.

“Hm?”

“You have no qualms about taking my life, do you?”

With an absurdly beautiful smile, Reina Kamisu replies:

“—Of course not. Why should I have any qualms?”

“Tell me,” she continues, surprising me, “why are you smiling so happily?”

Only now do I realize that a smile has been glued to my face. Without a thought, I cover my mouth, but as I do so, I peek into her eyes and return the favor.

“So are you,” I point out, causing her to cover her mouth as well. Amused by the fact that we showed the exact same reaction, we both start to laugh.

The fact that nothing about this peaceful moment is real only adds to it.

“Okay—” she mutters as she extends her soft hands to me. Her long, slender fingers fold around my neck. I can’t help but feel that this situation is perverted and even slightly sexual.

Her fingers strangulate me.

Her hands are as cold as those of a dead person. It feels like that coldness is absorbing everything from me.

Ah—I am vanishing for good.

Bit by bit, the sensation of being split is getting stronger. Slowly but surely, *I* am leaving my body. The mangled remains of myself are assembling into one piece again and leaving my body. Never before have I felt such an overwhelming feeling of anguish and pleasure.

And as I have predicted, I feel relieved.

In my last moments, I look at her while she is choking me.

Suddenly, I wonder: who is she, anyway?

Atsushi Kogure

I quickly dismiss that thought. Partially because my ability to think has dwindled, but mostly because it seemed like a meaningless thought once I saw her absurdly beautiful smile.

Instead, I say to her in my mind:

“Thank you.”

And then—

Atsushi Kogure died.

Shizuka Wakui

1

While letting the broken Engrish of our over 50-year-old English teacher in at one ear and out at the other after about 3 seconds, I look up terms on my electronic Kojien dictionary.

principle of mass conservation [n]

A principle in classical physics stating that the total mass of an isolated system is unchanged by interaction of its parts. Discovered in 1774 by Antoine Lavoisier.

principle [n]

1. A basic truth, law, or assumption.
2. A basic or essential quality or element determining intrinsic nature or characteristic behavior.

The mechanics of the world are surprisingly simple.

There must be lots of those basic and essential qualities, scattered all around the world, but if you divide them even further into their most essential parts, the absolute number of distinct qualities shrinks to a number that's everything but high.

Did you know that many laws and principles are just augmented rehashes of a set of already known core principles?

More often than not, you end up at the same place no matter from which side you approach the nature of things. That's also why the teachings of people who have mastered a way often coincide even though their ways have nothing in common.

In other words, if you understand some of those core principles, you start to see how the mechanics of the world work.

Core principles are the essence of things. Understand them and you can apply them wherever you want and form new, unshakable laws. Cores attract everything around them just like magnets.

But no one else really knows; they all grow up to be shallow people, only ever looking at the surfaces instead of the underlying cores. They let others influence themselves because their understanding only scratches the surface. They can't consider the true nature of things on their own. Poor people. All it would take to acquire those cores is picking up a good book. Oh, or is there a set of requirements that need to be fulfilled, which I happened to do? I pity them even more, then. It's as though they were characters of a manga fighting each other, unaware of what they are. Even though they fight for no purpose other than their writer's household. Even though their conflict is just a figment, and their very existence is for the sake of fighting.

Anyway, one of those few truths goes by the name of "mass conversion."

Contrary to its name, it's not limited to mass; the amount of everything is bound to a certain number that neither grows nor shrinks. Everything's unchanging, be it mass, energy, sex drive, the number of souls—you name it.

The lesson ended while I was absorbed in thought, gazing at my electronic dictionary. Classes are finally over. I have better things to do than this. But I can't just deviate from my usual behavior and skip school. I mustn't let anyone get wind of what I'm doing; if I appear suspicious, it becomes more likely that someone will notice *it*. Before anyone else, especially—

“Phew, done for the day! Shizuka, wanna tag along somewhere today?”

Before anyone else, that easy-going boy, Kazuaki, might notice. Which is because we have spent too much time together from an early age on.

“I’ll pass,” I reply toward the adjacent seat.

“Oh come on... you’re so cold,” my childhood friend says as he purses his lips. Geez... he just won’t change.

“I’ve got something to take care of, you see.”

“You’ve been saying that all the time lately... you’re not trying to avoid me, are you?” Kazuaki asks as he wrinkles his brow. Oh dear, he really doesn’t change.

“Of course not!”

“Uh-huh...,” he mutters downheartedly.

“Why don’t you go home with the C2 duo if you’re feeling lonely?”

“T-There’s nothing between me and—” he counters in denial with a slightly flushed face.

“Senpai~!”

“H-Hozumi-chan... don’t be so loud, it’s embarrassing...”

His objection is cut off from afar by two girl voices. With the appearance of those two innocent-looking girls, I wave my hand to Kazuaki.

“See you.”

“Ah...”

Don’t look at me like that; I’m not leaving you behind because I want to. As soon as I’ve sorted this out, I’ll tag along whenever you want.

But that has to wait, okay?

The world is at stake, after all.

Unconcerned by the waves of students heading homeward, I look around in thought.

The world is in danger.

Maybe that’s an exaggeration. But in the very least, danger is looming ahead in this vicinity. I hoped I was wrong (which was out of question, of course, but I wanted to be wrong) but with the news that 3 students at the Shikura middle school committed suicide, my fear proved true.

We’re in imminent danger.

And here we return to the thing about core principles and conservation of mass.

I used to be a completely normal girl; I may have hit puberty earlier than others, and have received dozens of confessions already, and I primarily hanged around with Kazuaki instead of other girls, but apart from that, I was a completely normal girl.

I'm using the past tense here because I feel that this no longer holds true.

There is a number of truths (cores). By getting to know these, I learned how I'm supposed to look at things.

It didn't take long for me to hit upon a certain question. We all have feelings. Joy, anger, sadness, fun.

Now, let's apply the law of conservation of mass to this case. Emotions are energy, which, especially in the case of love and hatred, store extreme heat. We consume emotional energy by converting it into energy that keeps us moving. However, not all of our feelings are always converted and consumed. But then where does the energy go when we are unable to suppress our feelings? Most of all, where does the energy go when we die—which must be a tremendous amount when faced with a violent death—when it can't possibly be consumed? Where does that energy fade away to?

With that question in mind, I started to *pay attention*.

Before long, I found the answer: the energy doesn't disappear at all. The answer was right under my nose, on the other side. Strong feelings, to raise an example, which often happen to be grudges, surface slightly on our side from time to time. It's dead easy to observe

when you clear yourself for a moment and float up. Look, there's one. There's an accumulation of converted emotional energy. In most cases, those accumulations are shaped like a human.

Anyway, back to the danger the world is facing.

After becoming aware of those humanoid energies, I observed a peculiar change as of late.

Originally, those humanoid energies were unable to move by themselves, and completely harmless for people who didn't notice them; they would just stay put at one place and spread their network in order to influence whatever got caught in there.

Lately, however, they changed their behavior and started to shimmer like mirages. As if afraid of something or in ecstasy? I can't tell. What I can tell, however, is that it's not normal and that it's a sign for something to happen.

I don't know what the humanoid energies will do, how that will affect us, and what will happen, but there is one fact:

Three students died at the Shikura middle school.

But that's of no import. Well, of course it's very deplorable that their lives were lost, but in the face of the great menace that might be ahead of us, even a loss like that turns insignificant.

Three people died. What if... what if that was just a sign?

If, hypothetically speaking, this phenomenon was due to a natural circumstance, I would probably have to give up and let things take their way. Besides, we would just have to take cover and wait for the menace to pass by.

However—what if someone is pulling the wires behind the scenes?

It's not that I take issue with that ethically, no. What if we are not dealing with a random phenomenon, but with one that is deliberately called forth by someone? What if there is someone who can use that power whenever he wants? What if there is someone who can control all the humanoid energies that are likely to be spread all over the world?

That's what I fear.

After all, if my concerns prove true and that really was a man-made incident, he could endanger the life of everyone in the world.

The world is in danger.

Someone is scheming to ruin us all; someone evil like that is among us. And I have to track that person down.

That's why I've been closely observing the humanoid energies around me for a while.

{Volcano goes up to the 2nd floor of a black minus to eat warmed-up food and falls.}

{I want to eat the lucky meat that died ten times but resurrected a hundred times.}

{I throw a telephone receiver into a 4-dimensional pocket because the trash bin is full.}

{The unrivaled adventures of Hutch the Honeybee are living tourmalines.}

As they shimmer, the energies give off signals on a different wavelength that, while barely converted into my language, make no sense whatsoever.

However, I can make out a difference in volume.

Slowly but surely, their voices (?) grow louder and their flickering stronger.

Maybe I'm getting closer to the bad guy.

Last time, their abnormal behavior stopped while I was investigating, but I don't feel any signs of that happening again. I might be able to find him this time around.

—The uncanny conjurer who could easily extinguish three lives.

That's right... I'm about to run into a horrible foe...

Only now noticing this fact, my feet sink into cement and my steps become slower.

Besides... How do I know that his victims add up to just three? The only reason why I associated their deaths with the anomaly that occurred to the humanoid energies is because they were all suicides and happened in succession in my school. I don't know if they're even related to the anomaly I observed.

On the other hand, you can also say that there might be numerous undiscovered victims that I could not tie to this menace.

Come to think of it... the suicide rate has been growing lately. Hey, what if that's partly due to the criminal I'm about to meet? That's by no means unlikely; not only would killing someone with humanoid energies leave behind no evidence, it wouldn't even be noticed.

What am I going to do, meeting a person like that?

Sure, I can perceive humanoid energies. But that's about it. Apart from that, I'm just a normal girl who may have hit puberty earlier than others, and has received dozens of confessions already, and primarily hangs around with Kazuaki instead of other girls. Probably.

What is a girl like me going to do against a heinous criminal like that? Persuade him? Would my words really get through? Would he leave someone who knows his secret alive?

My legs stop completely.

But—

But if he were to extend his deadly hands toward Kazuaki...

My buried legs come free from the cement and I start moving forward again.

I'm afraid... I really am, but...

I have no other choice.

{Corn rings with gleaming rainbows in the background.}

{After bathing in Nattou, Watanabe-san's car travels through through time as it flies through the air.}

{A club-wielding maid brings Nagatacho's meat shreds into motion.}

The voices (?) become louder.

The sentences are as devoid of meaning as before, but the weight of their words has changed. With crackling tension they reverberate through my body, prickling my brains like with a mechanical pencil.

A grudge? I think to myself as I notice a core of a humanoid energy. A type of energy that would normally only get transported to people who were caught up in their nets flows to me.

I feel nauseated. Like on the day of my worst menstruation.

I want to curl up immediately, but I mustn't. There's someone I have to meet. I must meet her.

...Huh? Her?

Why do I know her gender?

I pull myself up and stagger into the park before me. Except for a few children with their parents near the sandpit, there's nobody besides me.

Nobody.

I stand before an old, weathered wooden bench. I don't know what to say. I don't know if *it* possesses the ability of language, anyway. However, I can't just stand here, so I try speaking to it.

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

She raises her head.

“Ah—” I groan in surprise.
Her features were absurdly beautiful.
But what surprised me more than anything was the
fact that I—

“Reina... Kamisu.”

—knew the name of that phenomenon.

2

“Doctor, I think I’ll cancel our meetings.”
Doctor Mihara looks at me, slightly astonished, and
asks, “Why?”

“I only came here because I needed support back
then, didn’t I?”

He gives me a small nod.

“So you are not in need of support anymore?”

“Yes, I’m not. The fits of depression I used to have
are gone, and so is my aversion against talking to
others,” I explain and decide to add something I
experienced the other day when I was waiting here,
“and I don’t rush out of this room screaming.”

A few wrinkles appear in the doctor’s brow.

“Who,” he says after a short pause, “are you talking
about?”

“I’m talking about the boy who was often here before
me. If I recall correctly, he was wearing the uniform of
our school. He bumped into me the other day, didn’t he?
What’s his name again?”

“...I am afraid that I cannot talk to you about my other clients.”

“Not even his name? Whatever. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen him lately.”

His mien darkens clearly.

“He is not going to... come again.”

“Is that so...?”

“Yes,” he nods.

I doubt they would just discontinue his mental treatment in that condition; did something happen? Seeing how he ran away screaming, there must be a reason why he didn’t want to come anymore.

But I have a strange gut feeling about this.

After all, that boy is a student of the Shikura middle school. Given that he was under mental treatment, it’s more than possible that he had a reason for suicide, so he might be among the three suicide victims.

Judging from Doctor Mihara’s bitter mien, he must know the truth. I refrain from asking more, however, because his personality would not allow him to answer me.

“At any rate, you said you want to cancel our meetings?” he says, getting back on topic, “in my view, it is a bit early for that.”

“I know, Doctor. You’re right in that my wounds have not yet healed up; I’m not my former self yet, either.”

“That’s not the problem,” he argues. “These wounds will accompany you through your entire life, and you will not be able to return to your uninjured former self anymore.”

“Where lies the problem, then?” I ask.

“I am hesitant to believe that you have really recovered from the shock.”

“But in that case, wouldn’t I be coming here for the rest of my life?”

The doctor pauses for a moment. “Still... it is still too early.”

I get worked up a little; is he claiming that I’m *weird*? Therefore, I object:

“Doctor. Let me be frank. We’re not a wealthy household. The bill for this psychological therapy cuts pretty deep into our budget!”

“.....” He lapses into silence as I bring up my monetary circumstances.

“Maybe you’re right and I haven’t fully recovered from the shock yet, but I’m confident that with the support of my parents and the few friends I have—like Kazuaki—I will be able to get better.”

“I do not disagree with that. However, I feel that you are still in need of a specialist like me.”

“Why?” I ask, somewhat irritated.

“...Very well, let me explain my concerns: I feel that you have delusional tendencies.”

“...Delusional tendencies?” I ask in response to his unexpected claim. I have trouble seeing what he is referring to.

“Yes. I do not know how developed that inclination was when you first came here because you would not open yourself up to anyone... but I think that those delusional tendencies have become stronger as you regained your vitality.”

“Huh? Do you mean I threw away my common sense in order to come to terms?” I ask.

“I cannot say for sure. I do surmise, however, that in order to protect yourself from the deep wound you sustained, you were forced to alter various things that would otherwise have caused more damage, including a certain sense of values.”

“...In other words, you want to say that I’m still closing myself off?”

“I do not fully agree with the nuance of that... but that might be close. As I said earlier, it is by no means a bad thing to change. The problem is the direction of your change. Of course, I think that it is better than staying wounded, but I do not consider it a solution.”

After carefully digesting his words, I object:

“Stop kidding me.”

“Wakui-san...”

“I’m still *weird*, eh? That’s not true! I’ve become *normal* again!” I scream, evoking more anger that comes welling up. “Enough! I’m sick and tired! You’ve seen me for the last time!”

With these words, I stand up and turn away from him.
“Wakui-san!”

Ignoring the words he throws after me, I leave his office.

There was no going back anymore.

I went to school as usual the next day.

My chin rested on the desk, I’m eagerly waiting for the chime to ring. Because of the slow pace the clock is moving at, I think back at the therapy session yesterday.

I think I got a bit too hysterical. I’m sorry for Doctor Mihara. He only stated his honest opinion, nothing more.

That said, I say to myself as I recall his words from yesterday.

Delusional? Me?

I admit, my fixed opinion on the existence of humanoid energies might seem delusional from a certain common-sense-influenced perspective. However, I have carefully elaborated the underlying logic for this theory; I’m in the right. If anything, I’m one step ahead of the average Joe.

Anyway, that doesn’t really matter in this case: I haven’t told the doctor about the humanoid energies.

I’m a patient; a mentally ill person. Because I’m aware of the implications this bears, I have deliberately kept from informing him so that he wouldn’t get the wrong idea.

That means that... he views me as delusional even without the story about humanoid energies?

...That's nonsense. I'm normal. No matter which of my limbs you take a look into, I look completely *normal* and off-the-rack.

And yet, and yet! You treat me like a mentally ill person!

Getting upset again, I kick Kazuaki who is sitting next to me.

“Ouch!”

Idiot! Why do you cry out...?

As a natural consequence, the eyes of the class—the teacher's included—gather on Kazuaki. Feigning ignorance, I look at my notebook and start writing random characters.

“What was that for...?!” he complains quietly, scowling at me reproachfully, after everyone's attention returned to the lesson.

“Just because.”

“So you were that kind of person who doesn't need a reason to beat someone, huh? Shizu-chan... sob, sob.”

“‘Sob, sob’, eh? Who's the girl between us?”

Suddenly, the chime rings and ends our whispered exchange. Going through the routine, we stand up, bow to the teacher, and sit down.

A few moments later, our class teacher enters the classroom and finishes homeroom with some idle talk. My business at school is over for today.

Immediately after I stand up and say, “Bye,” Kazuaki approaches me:

“Shizuka, wanna go home together?”

“Sorry, but I have something to do again.”

That park is located in the opposite direction from the train station we would use when going home.

In visibly low spirits, Kazuaki mutters, “...Uh-huh.”

“...Again, Kazuaki, I’m really not avoiding you,” I assure.

“I know!”

“Then don’t pull such a visage.”

“But that appointment takes priority over me, doesn’t it?”

Taken by surprise, I search for words.

“Well... that’s true, but...”

“Aah, umr, it’s okay, it’s okay. Sorry for being grumpy.”

Indeed, he’s being a little grumpy. Still, I say what I’m supposed to say:

“...Sorry that I can’t tag along with you.”

That was enough to bring a smile to his face. Geez, he’s such a simple person.

“See you, Kazuaki,” I say as I wave him goodbye. He returns a wave, smiling.

Walking down the corridor, I head toward my shoe locker.

My pace is gradually increasing.

I want to go there, quickly, and see *her*.

Am I looking forward to seeing her? Hmm? At the very least, it feels different from going to a long-awaited bargain sale. If I were to phrase my current feelings... maybe like going for the first time to your boyfriend's place? Even though you feel only negative things like nervousness, fear and embarrassment, you don't feel bad at all. Like that.

“Um—” a voice suddenly disturbs me, however.

I look up to confirm whose voice that was, and recognize one of the C2 duo, Hozumi Shiiki, coming down the stairs.

“If that’s not Hozumi-chan from the C2s,” I remark in response.

“...What’s ‘C2’?”

“The name of your girl group. Ah, um, forget it.”

C2 stands for “the two chibis.”

“Anyway,” I continue, “what do you want from me? I’m in a hurry.”

“I, um... would like to discuss something with you, concerning Toyoshina-senpai.”

Kazuaki Toyoshina.

As is pretty obvious from her usual attitude, Hozumi-chan—that short but busty (D cup, I bet my shirt!) girl—has a crush on Kazuki. Like, she’s all over him. You wouldn’t believe that a calm-looking girl like her would be so offensive when it comes to Kazuaki. Although only when backed up by the other part of the C2 duo, Yoshino Mitsui.

Hm, this matter is interesting enough to spare a few minutes. I haven't set a time for my appointment with *her* after all. I'm not even sure if the concept of time exists for *her*.

"Fine, let's talk."

"Thank you," she replies. "Let's find us a better place to talk."

"Sure. How about the canteen?"

Hozumi-chan nods and follows me.

Waiting for her to start talking, I take a gulp from a paper cup and savor the taste of the orange juice. Hozumi-chan hasn't spoken a word since she sat down even though she was the one who asked me here.

Hm... should I expect a somewhat serious discussion here?

I think she knows that I've noticed her feelings for Kazuaki, and I think she also knows that I can't give her a hand in that matter.

I could've sworn that she planned to talk about that through, but maybe I was wrong?

As I start looking closely at her, Hozumi-chan lowers her gaze bashfully. She's by far not as offensive as she usually is... Because Yoshino-chan's not with her? Or does she only get offensive when it comes to getting Kazuaki's attention?

"...Urm..." she finally squeezes out.

“Hm?”

“Are you, Wakui-san, and Toyoshina-senpai only childhood friends?”

Having anticipated a question along those lines, I don’t move a muscle.

“Oh my, you could’ve just asked Kazuaki.”

“I did.”

“Hm? Ah, yeah, he’s easier to approach than me, isn’t he? What did he say? Ah, no, it’s OK. I can tell. But I see... so you realized that we are likely to give you a different answer to that question.”

“...” She remains silent.

“Out of interest, do we look like mere childhood friends?”

Hozumi-chan ponders for a few moments. “No, you don’t...”

I nod at her response.

“You’re right. A mere childhood friend wouldn’t choose the same high school just to stay together, nor would that person beg his teacher to put their seats next to each other, nor would that person toy happily with the other part’s hair.”

“...Who’s who?”

“Do you really want to know?”

Hozumi-chan casts her eyes downward and lapses into silence again.

I take another gulp from my orange juice, deliberately drinking from it slowly because I don’t know how long she is going to stay silent.

It isn't before I put the emptied paper cup onto the table that she continues.

"...How should I deal with that?" Hozumi-chan whispers low-spiritedly.

"What do you mean by that? Are you restraining yourself for him...? No, you were aware of that all along. You're restraining yourself for me, right?"

After a few moments of wavering, she finally nods.

"Don't mind me," I say.

Surprised, Hozumi-chan looks up at me.

"What's up with that face? Didn't expect me to say that?"

"B-But... you both love each other no matter how you look at it..."

"No matter how you look at it? Also when you look at us?" I ask.

"Probably..."

"You're unsure? Even though we're talking about the boy that's always on your mind?"

"...Yes," she replies honestly.

"I see. That means that you, Hozumi-chan, have a better idea of us than those unspecified people that view us as a couple."

"Huh...?"

"I don't know Kazuaki's thoughts on this, but I for one have no idea how you could describe our relationship."

"You don't...?"

"Mm."

Hozumi-chan takes a few moments to think about the reason why I phrased it that way. At last, she comes to an answer.

“Does that mean that I don’t have to restrain myself for you?” she asks.

After a short pause, I reply, “Sure.”

“Good...,” she says with a blatant smile, which she is trying to hide, “I always felt bad about you.”

“I know that you did,” I confess as I hold the empty cup against my lips, “but don’t resent me for that. I couldn’t just tell you to ignore me and hit on him to your heart’s content, could I?”

“...Yes,” Hozumi-chan says, her face gloomy-looking again.

“Ah, I’m not being sarcastic here, okay? ...In fact, I’d rather Kazuaki found someone else other than me.”

She is visibly surprised by that fact. Geez...will her face ever stay put for a while?

“I don’t know if a day will come when I can answer his feelings for me. Maybe not, and I’d keep him waiting. Therefore, I think it’s for his sake if I left him to a girl like you, Hozumi-chan,” I explain and she listens. While putting down and picking up the cup for no particular reason, I continue, “He ought to learn that I’m not the only girl there is. Because he... only ever paid attention to me.”

Hozumi-chan remains silent, her face cast down. After a while, she looks up and looks me deep in the eyes.

“I won’t... hold back anymore!” she says with a calm but resolute voice.

Slightly unsettled by her straight gaze, I avert my eyes a little bit.

“And I just told you that’s okay, didn’t I?” I answer—with a voice slightly quieter than before.

Still fixed on my face, she nods, “...I see.” She lets out a short sigh I almost overlooked. “Thank you for your time. See you...”

“Yeah, see you.”

Hozumi-chan picks up her bag and, after giving me a brief bow, leaves without looking back.

As I gaze at my empty paper cup, I ask myself:

...Hey Shizuka. Are you serious?

I wonder? I think I am. I think so... but somehow I’m not fully comfortable with what I said. I feel a bit like I were trying to make myself believe a drawn apple was a real one.

I gaze at the chair in front of me that’s still pulled away from the table.

Hozumi-chan.

She’s a good girl. No doubt about that. Even I have to admit that she’s pretty. Every normal boy would fall for her almost instantly if she wanted them to.

But what of it?

She’s a good girl, so what? She’s pretty, so what? Does that make her suitable for Kazuaki?

I try to imagine not me but her standing besides Kazuaki.

...No, I can't. I can't imagine that.

However... there is something I'm grateful of her.

Only thanks to her could I remain level-headed like this—because she didn't probe into my actual feelings for Kazuaki.

A tingling sensation runs through my head like a swarm of ants. I feel nauseated even though my stomach is perfectly fine.

I—

—crushed the paper cup in my hand.

The talk with Hozumi-chan has affected me, no doubt, but that's no reason to change my plans; I head to *her*.

I don't know when and where she is waiting, but I know that she's **there**.

The humanoid energies are flickering again, frantically trying to break into someone's body.

{Unforgivable. Unforgivable. Your new website is unforgivable.}

{I love you. Iloveyou. I love you, giant vs. Yakult.}

{I know your secret! You take off your trousers when you go to the toilet!}

It's getting dangerous—their words are starting to make sense to me. I'm slowly starting to see the underlying feelings of their cryptic messages.

A tingling pain runs through my body.

I instinctively realize that it's dangerous to understand *their* language. Understanding them is equivalent to being able to communicate with them, and communicating with them requires opening myself to them for the duration of the conversation. *They* are not going to let that chance slip.

I try to disregard *them* like I would ignore those people distributing free tissues.

I just have to avoid contact with them, that's all. I just have to ignore the fact that they're not just roughly shaped like humans anymore, but possess human silhouettes by now.

Ignoring *them* with all my might, I find myself at the same park as the other day again. *She* is sitting on the same bench as previously.

The first thing I ask *her*, who is absurdly beautiful, is:

“Hey, is it because of you that I can now see the outlines of humanoid energies?”

“You’,” she says instead of answering my question. Apparently, she is not addressing me, but repeating the word I used to refer to her. “Call me Reina. In return, I’ll also call you Shizuka. Okay?”

“I don’t mind...” I answer warily.

“Shizuka it is, then. Did you consider my offer?”

Heh, my question got ignored.

“Your *offer*, huh... don’t you think that a little too one-sided? You said what you wanted to say and suddenly ‘disappeared.’ Besides, I have no idea what you mean by, ‘Do you want to come with me?’”

“Seriously...?”

“Seriously,” I reply with a sigh.

“Even though you possess such skills?” she asks with blunt astonishment.

“Yes. I suppose we acquired these skills in different ways. When you climb a mountain from different directions, you still arrive at the same place, no?”

Reina pauses for a while and nods at last.

“I see, that’s why you call *them* ‘humanoid energies.’”

“Understood?”

“Yes. Because there is a much easier and straightforward name for them, isn’t there? ‘Spirits.’”

“I have to admit that I also thought of that name when I first got to recognize their outlines. However, there is a certain discrepancy between my definition of the word ‘spirit’ and how I define ‘humanoid energy,’ although that’s probably just my common sense restraining me. I couldn’t give this phenomenon a hackneyed name such as ‘spirit.’ Even now, to be honest, they will stay humanoid energies to me. Do you understand?”

“I certainly do. But you ought to keep in mind that they’re not *humanoid energies* for anyone else. Of course, *spirit* is only the answer for a limited number of people as well,” she explains.

“...Sorry, I’m afraid you’ve lost me.”

“In other words, the term ‘humanoid energy’ may be your own way of calling them, but by naming them that way, they have assumed the role of humanoid energies.”

“...like an orange becomes an orange with our awareness of that name...?”

“Hmm, that’s slightly off, I’m afraid. You should take a less explainable thing as an example. Like... God. Do you believe in God, Shizuka?”

“I, I guess not.”

“Okay, that means that you might thank your own luck when you’ve been lucky, right? But as soon as we coin the term ‘God’, you’ll be thanking not your luck, but God for watching over you—and that’s an entirely different message, isn’t it?”

“...Yeah, I think I see where you’re coming from, but that’s not a good example. To raise a better one, ‘air’ can only exist as ‘air’ if you know its name. That’s your point, right?”

After all, we cannot perceive air unless we have heard of it, since it’s neither visible nor palpable.

“Color me impressed, Shizuka. You’re quick!”

“Hold back the flattery, please. Anyway, may I ask a few questions?”

“Sure, if I can answer them,” she says, accepting my request.

“Great, then to start—” I pose the question I’ve been dying to ask, “—Who are you?”

Seemingly unable to grasp the significance of my question, Reina inclines her head.

“Why do you ask?”

“You’re not human, but neither are you a humanoid energy.”

“But you already know my name, don’t you?”

“...Reina Kamisu.” As I say her name, I understand what she’s getting at.

“Right, I’m Reina Kamisu. That and nothing else.”

Right, I have already named the essence of that phenomenon ‘Reina Kamisu.’

“...Fine, I will no longer ask that question. But... why did you get in touch with me?”

“It seems like there is a misunderstanding on your part. *You were the initiator of our contact, weren’t you?*”

“...True. Then why did you make that offer to me?”

“Because you have power, Shizuka.”

“What power?”

“You have the ability to sense ‘humanoid energies,’ to borrow your naming.”

“I know that. What I don’t know is what kind of power this ability translates into.”

Reina stays silent for a few moments, thinking, until she answers me with a smile:

“It’s the power to save the world.”

Surprised, my eyes widen. After all, my fundamental suspicion was that Reina’s existence poses a threat to peace, and that’s why I got in touch with her.

If I were to believe her words...

“—So what you’re doing—setting the humanoid energies into motion—is part of saving the world?”

“Yes.”

“Spare me your lies! I know that your deeds have yielded several victims!”

“Several,” she smiles. “Is saving several people equivalent to saving the world?”

“...Do you mean that...?”

“You’re probably spot on.”

In other words, Reina has sacrificed a few people in order to save everyone else? Like the masses in a war that was started just to seize a single dictator? Like an elephant among a hungry group of animals that was killed for the others to survive?

As I fight with increasing confusion, Reina smiles at me and continues:

“I know it all, Shizuka.”

Her following words unsettle me even more.

“You only acquired that ability after that incident, didn’t you?”

3

I am wearing my favorite, white dress.

The frilled ends of my skirt float in the air as I whirl around.

Am I not pretty?

Who am I wearing it for?

For you, of course, and for me, for my feelings for you.

I want to be pretty for you, always the prettiest.

But someday I will have to take off the white dress.

And you will undress me.

—Or so I hoped.

But now—

I'm still wearing that dress, and I won't let you touch it.

Because my favorite, white dress is full of stains.

But yet I keep wearing the dress.

I keep wearing a non-white dress.

I keep wearing a non-white dress for you to undress.

Until it's too late to turn back.

4

Dang... it doesn't function.

The 'lettuce' I sowed yesterday doesn't function. It's as Reina said... If I don't change, my power will stay limited.

In order to acquire real power, I have to leap over this world and transcend all existence and pass through several deltas.

Break, class room. Chairs, chairs, desks, a fluttering humanoid energy, Kazuaki.

"Kazuaki, spare me a moment, please." I say to Kazuaki who's talking with Kiichi-kun, a friend of his.

"Hm? What's the matter, Shizuka?"

Kiichi-kun politely leaves us alone. Mm, sorry but thanks.

“Okay, listen closely. The world is about to burst.”

“Shizuka...?”

“As I said, the world is overfull. There’s a critical level in every system, no? You understand that, right?”

“...I think I do... hey, um, I already said this in the previous break, but you don’t look good today, Shizuka.”

“That doesn’t matter. Forget about me for now. Just listen,” I urge him.

“I think it does matter, but fine...”

“Humanoid energies... no, I hate to do this, but let’s call them ‘spirit’ because it’s simpler. As you may know, Kazuaki, there are countless things that can’t be perceived by the eye. Hell, way too many for my taste. And in order to become aware of them, we have to give them appropriate names... hold on, that doesn’t matter now either, does it? At any rate, those spirits do exist, okay?”

“...Okay.”

“Those spirits keep increasing in number. The number keeps growing and they have started to overflow wherever you look, even around us. In fact, there’s one right there in the corner. Of course, some spirits just pass away as they should do, but most don’t. Therefore, we can define that spirits are in a constant growth. Right, this lifecycle is thus comparable to the production of oxygen. With each breath, plants also exhale carbon dioxide but the amount of oxygen that is

produced thanks to photosynthesis is greater, so they are effectively producing oxygen by definition. Like that.”

“Okay...”

“You know what happens if they keep on populating? The world turns upside down. The front and the back get inversed. Do you understand? You do, right? It’s a revolt! By the spirits! It makes perfect sense that the world would lean toward the side that holds more energy. Can you imagine the consequences? The world would have tilted away, after all: We would fall from the surface of the world, losing our shape, turning into ambiguous beings, scattering in all directions. Perhaps. I don’t know the details, of course, but neither do we know the exact consequences of blasting and burning our globe with explosives, right? In other words, the only thing that I can tell for sure is that the resulting world is in no way desirable. What do you think should I do? Do you, do you think that I’m supposed to prevent that whatever it takes?”

“...Shizuka,” Kazuaki says as he gazes closely at me.

Thanks goodness; he has taken me seriously.

Kazuaki gives Kiichi-kun a glance, “I’m sorry, Kiichi, but Shizuka and I are leaving early today.”

Surprised, Kiichi-kun replies, “Huh...? Ah, i-it’s okay, Kazuaki, nothing urgent, really.”

“Tell them that I’m taking Shizuka home because she’s not feeling well.”

Ignoring my question, he pulls me by my arm.

Kazuaki is touching my arm.

The cells of my arm start to decompose and rot away one by one. It hurts. Unsustainable, boundless ressentiment prickles me.

“Kazuaki... Have you forgotten?”

He reflexively lets go of my hand, watching me with wide-open eyes. After a while, he apologizes in a voice I can barely hear.

Kazuaki won't turn around, so I'm just wordlessly following him.

As we trace our way home, we enter the train line we use every day. There are almost no people because of the off-peak time it is. Huh? There's someone standing despite the many unoccupied seats. Ah, it's a humanoid energy. How confusing. Come to think of it, how do I distinguish between humans and humanoid energies, again? Huh? How did I use to do that? I can't seem to remember.

We get off the train, but when I try to go through the ticket gate, I bump into the barrier because the machine won't react to my season ticket. What's up with this? Is this also the wicked deed of humanoid energies? That's by no means impossible. I put my season ticket on the sensor again, and this time the barrier opens. Phew, that's really confusing.

I keep going after Kazuaki.

Right, left, right, right, left—we turn and turn and turn.

At last, we arrive at a park, but not the one I've been meeting Reina at. It's a very small, commonplace park with a bunch of rusty structures.

“...Do you remember this place?” Kazuaki suddenly asks, turning around to me.

Even though he has been dead-silent on the way here, he is smiling eerily gently. Because I don't give him any reaction, he continues himself:

“It's the park where we first met, back when we were 2 years old. Well, I don't expect you to remember all the way back, but you remember that we used to play here, don't you?”

“...”

Of course I do.

However, I hesitate to say anything because I can't quite grasp the meaning of bringing me here and telling me that.

“When we were little, you were taller than me and you would always tease me. To be honest, there were days when I was so frightened of you that I didn't want to see you, Shizuka!” he laughs.

I look around. Indeed, this is the park where we used to play together. I often played with Kazuaki in that sand box over there, or on those swings, or with that horizontal bar. The jungle gym has been removed by

now, but apart from that, this park remains a place of young memories that we thought was our own little empire.

“Those were good times, weren’t they?” Kazuaki continues, still smiling gently.

His smile causes in me—resentment.

I keep silent, however, because it’s not his fault. He is not to blame. It’s just that I feel like throwing up because of a prickling in my stomach.

Therefore, I decide to tell Kazuaki what he must know.

“Kazuaki, listen...”

“Okay!” he answers quick like a shot—with a subtle touch of resignation.

“You are very important to me, Kazuaki,” I begin, apparently betraying his fears. His eyes widen. “I think that everyone has a certain role in life. For example, the president of a certain republic has to protect the world on his high throne, while the prime minister of a certain island nation has to obey that president. Mother Teresa had to serve in Calcutta, Columbus had to set foot on America, and Madame Curie had to discover polonium and radium. And I... I have to save the world.”

“How are you going to do that...?”

“I’ll make sure that the world doesn’t turn over to their side by releasing the power inside those humanoid energies and reducing their number. There may be victims while they are flickering for a while after their power is released, but that’s a necessary evil. Don’t get

me wrong—my conscience is pricking me for this, but I can't help it. I have to take action; it's my role because I know what has to be done.”

“...Assuming that were the right thing to do—”

“Kazuaki. I understand that the idea seems absurd at first, but it is the right thing to do.”

He averts his gaze toward the ground. After a moment of thought, he corrects himself:

“While I suppose that it must be the right thing to do—why is there a need that you're in charge of that task, Shizuka? Just hand over the responsibility to someone else. You said that you know how to save the world, but Shizuka... We all know of the countries suffering from poverty, where children are born to die early on, girls have to resort to prostitution just to contract AIDS, and weak people die of illnesses caused by a bad environment and a lack of medication. We all know that, yet we do nothing to fix this issue, except maybe for some coin that we donate. This is the world we live in. There will always be people seeking a savior. If we were to answer each and every call for help, we would get trapped at some point, living only for the sake of saving others. Think that's praiseworthy? Well, it is. But what of it? Do you think a lifestyle where you sacrifice yourself for others is right? Perhaps it is, but I wouldn't want such a lifestyle. I'll rather ignore their calls for help—just like all the postal advertisement we get.”

“...Didn’t I tell you the reason right at the beginning, Kazuaki?”

“...”

“*You are very important to me.*”

Right, Kazuaki lives in this world.

He looks down again.

“...It’s cool that you think like that, it really is, but...”

“...It’s okay, Kazuaki. Just get off your chest what you really want to say.”

I heard enough to tell that Kazuaki does not see the danger the world is facing. He only sees the issues he thinks I am facing.

He slowly raises his head to look at me, almost scowling.

Nonetheless—

“Come down to earth, Shizuka! You lost touch with reality.”

Nonetheless, I have faith in myself.

After all, there is someone who confirms my view.

“Reality.”

“...Yeah, reality! You went through a lot of hardships, that’s true, but look... take this park for example—this place is reality, too, okay? Not everything’s so bad.”

Ah, now I see... that’s why he brought me here. But Kazuaki...

Your point backfired.

Besides, your reality doesn’t matter to me. Reality to me is that the world is at stake, and the only one able to save it are *she* and I.

“Among the things you said to me, Kazuaki, there is one thing that I particularly like.”

“Hm...?”

“Do what you think is the right thing to do.””

“Yeah...” he nods and keeps his mouth shut.

We've known each other since we were little. He knows that I'm beyond persuasion. I'm sure, however—Kazuaki won't give up.

“Okay, then I'm going to do the right thing as well!”

With these words, he approaches me.

I know what he's going to do. I can easily imagine the implications of his strained face; we haven't been together for so long for nothing.

His neck is right before my eyes. I completely forgot that he's gotten larger than me.

I slightly raise my head to look at his face.

He slightly lowers his head to look at my face.

Finally, he—embraces me.

“I love you!” he whispers into my ear, as if to stress that I'm the only one who has to know. “I love you more than anyone else, Shizuka!”

I'm happy.

I'm really happy.

He isn't trying to stop me with false words of love. He isn't good enough with words for that.

He simply couldn't help saying it, having me in his embrace. It's the only thing he could think of.

Kazuaki's just so staggeringly honest, simple, faithful... giving me no other choice than to watch over him, making me want to be with him—

Even though my white dress has been stained.

Even though he can't have forgotten those stains.

He's daring a leap. The gamble of his life.

Of course, I'm on his side. I want him to win the wager.

And yet—

“...Don’t touch me.”

—I couldn’t.

The arms around me come loose instantly. Instead, I embrace myself tightly, burying my fingernails in my arms.

I’m glad that I’m smaller than Kazuaki now; I only have to slightly drop my gaze to avoid seeing his face.

My body hurts like it was pierced by a thousand needles. I’m fighting with the urge to hole out the contents of my aching head. The pictures from back then keep appearing in my head, shredding me, crushing me, pulping me, scattering me.

“I’m sorry...” not I but Kazuaki says.

Why are you apologizing? Stop it! I'm the one to blame. I'm the one who's weak. I'm the one who can't recover. I. It's my fault. My fault. Fault. Fault.

“Sorry for making you cry...”

Confused, I touch my eyelids and finally realize that I'm really crying.

“Isn't it strange? I wanted to achieve the opposite effect. Embracing you was supposed to *stop* your tears. I failed at that, didn't I... I'm not able to do it...”

I desperately try to hold my tears back. I mustn't make him say such things. But... it doesn't go well.

“I'm such a moron. I thought things would work out somehow if I came here... I thought everything would change for the better... as if it was so simple.”

“...Listen, Kazuaki...” I say, trying (and probably failing) not to sob.

“Hm?”

“There is something... that I didn't tell you.”

I raise my head, feeling that I have to.

“I never gave you the details of that incident, did I...? I didn't want to hurt you... To be honest... this park... this place of memories—”

“—is where I was raped.”

Stop.

Kazuaki stopped entirely.

He stopped so perfectly that I start to suspect that I was left alone in the world, removed from the flow of time.

—Left alone in the world? Hah, that's an accurate description. I'm sure that impression's not an illusion but a truth.

“...Horrible,” Kazuaki mutters.

He didn't say that word to me, nor did he address it at the people who had abused me. It wasn't addressed at God either, since he doesn't believe in one.

I'm sure his *horrible* wasn't addressed at anything in specific.

“That's just... horrible!”

Kazuaki didn't know that reality strikes whenever you expect it the least, no matter if it's a place of memories.

It treats saints and sinners all alike, attacking them mechanically, randomly, without any consideration and selection.

Kazuaki didn't know that.

No, he may have known it, but he didn't believe that this rule would also apply to us.

The world can turn against anyone meaninglessly. However, not in my case.

“I have to go,” I say.

“...Go where?” he squeezes out.

“To another park that I am supposed to visit.”

“Huh?”

“I have to go to Reina Kamisu.”

There was a meaning to the world's turning against me.

Right, Reina?

5

I told Reina Kamisu that I would follow her.

She welcomed me with open arms, seeming very happy about my decision. Of course, one reason for her delight is the raise in effectiveness, but I think she's also happy about finally having a companion in her sheer endless fight.

I don't know how long she's been fighting so far, but purging one humanoid energy after another (which keep increasing in the meanwhile) is like collecting the sand of a desert grain by grain.

I see. Maybe she's been waiting for a person like me who could help her save the world. No, she's still waiting. If the number of people helping her keeps increasing, then saving the world will stop being a pipe dream.

I look around in my room.

This will be the last time I'm here; deep emotion fills my heart. While it's not a cool room—with furniture like a dresser from my mom and things like a weird doll—but here I laughed and cried and laughed and cried.

Should I leave a letter to my parents and Kazuaki?
...No, they would confuse it for my last words or
something. Although that might be true in their eyes.

I open the lock of the topmost drawer of my desk and take out a cross choker.

Reina Kamisu told me that I would need to put on something very dear to me. When I asked for the reason, she explained that I needed a token of regret. I could see that I might accidentally get trapped on the other side of the world unless there was something chaining me to this side. In order to become like Reina, I'll probably need something like that.

I put on the choker.

I won't waver anymore.

I walk down the stairs and put on my shoes at the entrance.

"Shizuka, where are you going?" my mom asks from the kitchen without showing up.

"Just a bit far away."

With these words, I open the door.

By now, humanoid energies and humans look almost the same to me but I can still discern them somehow. Those energies have no aim or destination, so they practically stay put at one place; they mumble things even though they're alone, and while they're talking to themselves, their facial expressions do not change a bit.

Coming across several humanoid energy-like beings, I head to the place she's waiting.

{*Why did you throw me away, Takeshi! You told me you loved me!*}

{*I don't have any friends. I don't need to live.*}

{*Had I not gazed after that hot school girl, neither I nor the family driving the other car would have had to die.*}

{*What an idiotic accident!*}

Among them was one of a middle-aged man:

{*Why did you fire me! What did I do wrong!*}

Apparently, he had killed himself after losing his job.

“Hello,” I said, for the first time addressing a humanoid energy. Suicide after failing in one’s job life is not that uncommon, but his face somewhat resembled that of my dad.

{*You can... see me?*}

“I can. I can also hear you.”

{*I see... You shouldn't talk with me. Or perhaps... there's no harm to a young lady like you?*}

“I’m sure there’s none. Our values are way too different.”

{*Values, you say... In other words, you think the reason why I committed suicide seems cheap and cliched to you?*}

“Kind of. I mean, you’ll just get less income if you’re fired, and that’s it, right?”

The middle-aged humanoid energy looked at me sorrowfully. No, he (?) had a sorrowful look glued to his face all the time.

{*It's not that simple, young lady.*}

“What’s not so simple then?”

{I'm bad at explaining things, so I won't be able to convince you, but work was everything to me. Despite that, I was told to be of no use for the company. Do you see what I mean?}

“I do, but I’m not convinced after all.”

{I guess so. But there’s one thing that I want you to understand: there’s no place for old men like me. Not even in the family I was supposed to feed. Nevertheless, I firmly believed that I was needed, that I was a gear in the family that was the company I worked at.}

“But you didn’t stay one of its gears.”

{Exactly. And I wasn’t able to become part of anything else.}

“I think I understood more or less. Still... I think ending one’s life because of that is stupid.”

He lowered his gaze somewhat and answered,

{Yes... maybe you’re right.}

I think I then spotted a faint smile in his face.

And he swirled left and right.

“As I thought. You died, didn’t you?”

{What do you mean...?}

I found him.

“Don’t you remember me?”

{I don’t...}

I should have known; humanoid energies are the core of our energy, and as such only possess the most crucial of memories.

“When you were alive, you once bumped into me when you came rushing out of our psychiatrist’s room.”

{*I see... sorry.*}

“Oh, I don’t mind. By the way, what’s your name?”

{*Atsushi Kogure...*}

“I see, Atsushi-kun it is.”

{*What’s your name...?*}

“My name? I’m Shizuka Wakui.”

{*What business do you have with me, Shizuka-san?*}

“None, actually... if anything, I felt a bit nostalgic.”

{*I see... Would you please leave me alone, then?*}

“How cold. Hm... Okay, then may I ask you one thing?”

{*You may... but I won’t be able to answer you because I can’t remember anything.*}

“Really? I’ll ask anyway. You bumped into me—I told you that, right?”

{*Yes...*}

“What again were you shouting when you rushed out of the room?”

His eyes widen at once. I’m taken by surprise—humanoid energies do not change their expressions.

{*I don’t know.*}

That’s a lie. After all, he’s putting way more emphasis into his words than before.

{*I don’t know!*} he shouts, apparently sensing my doubt.

Atushi-kun said no more after that.

After changing trains a few times, I finally get off the train at the nearest station from a certain lake I've looked up beforehand.

During the travel, I was once again reminded of the omnipresence of humanoid energies. I fear the world could turn over any moment.

Spotting a group of carefree school girls, I feel a bit jealous of them. They don't have to see any of this and don't have to know how thin the ice is that we're on. The balance is as fragile as doing a triple Axel in an ice rink with ultra-thin ice.

After confirming the position of the lake on a map hung up at the station, I head to my destination.

As I walk, I recall Reina's words.

"Water works perfectly because it's connected all over the world."

In order to find a lake that fit the bill, I had to bring myself to google for 'places to commit suicide'.

I mean, 'suicide' ...? Heck, it's not like I'm going to die.

After a 40-minute walk, I arrive at the lake. I could have used a taxi (I won't have to care about money from now on, after all) but I didn't want to cause any bothersome misunderstandings.

"You're late."

Reina was there first, waiting for me with an absurdly beautiful smile.

"I'm sorry."

But I could come here whenever I wanted, no? You didn't tell me where I had to go, after all.

I gaze at the lake before me.

Ah, I see. No wonder it's become infamous as a place for suicide. What a huge number of humanoid energies. In fact, there's so many of them, that they have mingled into beings with an entirely different shape. It's like one of those old paintings of Youkais. Several heads are extending toward me, observing me closely. They look a bit like grapes to me, with the heads being the grapes.

I see. With there being so many of them, there is a wavelength for any person who comes here, drawing them into death. Of course, the people who come here do so with the intent of committing suicide; but actually ending one's life isn't so easy. The fear and attachment to life that surfaces when facing death help prevent suicide.

However, in the case of this lake, it's already too late once they've come here.

The humanoid energies exploit the hollow hearts of the suicidal visitors, shorting their reasonable thinking and drawing them into death.

"Shizuka, there are several places like this in the world."

"And we have to get rid of those places one by one, right?"

"Mmm," she shakes her head, "that's impossible."

"Why...?"

“It’s as simple as the problem of many against few. We have too little power. Once a place has turned into this, it’s beyond purification.”

I look at ‘them’ again.

I see. Having mixed together, complementing each other, they have turned into a monster. Should I try to step in and erase them, they will take me in as well and still try to regain their former shape. A mechanism that’s much alike a black hole formed in this place.

This place can’t be purged anymore.

“Ah—”

I see now. I understand everything.

This is it. This is what happens when our side of the world turns over.

Our proportional relation in power is negated on this side, and thus we get taken in by them. Our souls get devoured, our bodies become hollow and decay. That’s the outcome we’re steering towards.

“...We must stop these places from increasing, right?”

“Yes”, Reina nods in response to my realization.

“That’s our mission.”

I scowl at the monster in front of us. All of those grape-like beings are void of expression yet hostile.

They are—my enemy.

I press my cross choker tightly.

“Reina, one last thing.”

“...One *last* thing?” she smiles.

“...You’re right. It’s only just starting.”

“It is! So, what do you want to know?”

“You said that everyone has a certain role, right?”

“I did, yes.”

“That it’s my role to save the world,” I add.

“Right. Only the chosen ones can do that.”

“So, I was chosen because I obtained my power.”

And—

“—I obtained this power because of that incident.”

Reina nods with a smile.

Yeah, I see. I see now.

It never made sense to me: Why did I have to suffer so much? I was by no means a saint, of course, but I think I lived humbly enough to earn myself a ticket to heaven. So why did that incident happen to me of all people? It never made sense.

Of course, reality bares its teeth against anyone—with any consideration but with deadly poison in its teeth.

Yet, I helplessly failed to understand why it happened to me.

But now I can say with conviction:

Yes, there was a reason why I had to suffer so much.

It’s simple—

—It was necessary in order to save the world.

“You’re right, Shizuka,” she says with a warm smile.

“Those were obstacles imposed on you so that you could fulfill your mission!”

Right! I found the truth!

I mean, it wouldn’t be fair otherwise. It would be unfair if I were the only one so unlucky.

After all, if there wasn't a proper meaning in that incident, my suffering would have been all for naught.

“Yeah, then let's go, Reina! Let the game begin!”

“Yeah!”

Right, there's no reason to waver anymore.

I only have to muster up some courage and jump into the lake—

It's time to go to my new stage—

As I hold my cross choker, I jum—

“—Ah—”

As—I—hold—my—choker—

Someone's, Voice.

—TSCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

Scars.

Flesh.

White dress.

“—None.”

Cryingshizuka.

“—There is none!”

—TSCHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

“Here... a Christmas present.”

“Oh! Thanks, Kazuaki! May I open it?”

“Sure.”

“Wow! That’s beautiful! But wasn’t it expensive?”

“N-Not that much.”

“Isn’t that a diamond in the center of this crucifix?”

“Yeah, it is...”

“Hey, then it **was** expensive after all, you bragger!”

“S-Shut up... let me show off a bit!”

—TSCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

“Why did it happen to me of all people? Why?”

“Is there a meaning in this?”

—TSCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

I wouldn’t stop crying.

Kazuaki wouldn’t stop looking sad.

“Why did it happen to me of all people? Why?”

“Is there a meaning in this?”

I lamented like this, bothering him, until he finally opened his mouth, and squeezed out:

“—None.”

“—There is none!”

“There is no reason, Shizuka! If anything, it’s because your attackers couldn’t handle their sexual drive. You happened to come across them, and you happened to look good enough to them. But that’s not the reason you want, is it?”

“Reality treats saints and sinners all alike, attacking them mechanically, randomly, without any consideration and selection. You have to accept that, Shizuka.”

Reality treats saints and sinners all alike, attacking them mechanically, randomly, without any consideration and selection.

Right, now I remember—

That wasn’t originally my own belief—

It was just Kazuaki’s honest and true opinion.

—TSCHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH—

“What’s wrong, Shizuka?” the absurdly beautiful girl asks me.

My choker is all wet with my sweat.

“Reina Kamisu—”

“Yes...?”

“Who are you?”

Reina Kamisu holds her breath.

“...What’s it all of a sudden?” she asks.

“Those were obstacles imposed on me so that I could fulfill my mission.”

“...What about it?”

“What about it, you ask? Don’t play dumb! As if that could be true!”

“As if a reason would just pop up so conveniently!”

Losing her tongue, Reina Kamisu just gazes at me in a baffled manner.

“I understood everything. I sought a reason. A reason for my suffering. That’s why I came up with the logic of those humanoid energies and tried to find refuge there.”

She listens silently to me.

“Everyone else knew that I was trying to escape from reality. Be it Mihara-sensei or Kazuaki, or all of them. They knew I was escaping. After all, my logic only makes sense to myself. Yet, yet why is it—”

“—Why is it that you can understand me!”

“That’s strange! Why does someone like you, Reina Kamisu, just show up so overly conveniently to confirm my theory? I didn’t fully believe in it until you showed up, right? Why... why did you appear so—”

“Well,” she begins. “Because that’s what you wanted, Shizuka,” she says, slightly skewing her lips. “You sought an existence like me. A third person who would turn your delusions into reality. Given the name of Reina Kamisu.”

Reina Kamisu smiles. With a smile so beautiful it can't really exist.

Finally, I recall—what Atsushi Kogure has shouted when he rushed out of our psychiatrist's room.

And Atsushi-kun—

—is no more.

“Ah...ah...”

I hold my cross choker tightly.

Help me. Help me, Kazuaki.

“D-Do you intend to kill me?”

She looks at me with surprise when I ask so.

“Why would I?” she counters.

“I-I mean, it's true that you drove the students of the Shikura middle school into suicide, isn't it?”

She lifts her hand to her chin and replies after a short pause, “Perhaps.”

“...Perhaps?”

“I didn't actually do anything.”

“That's just not—”

“Not true? How about you, then?” she suddenly asks.

“Huh?”

“Would you be able to live on if I disappeared now?”

Ah—

I see what she means.

Reina is a phenomenon.

Just a phenomenon.

Sooner or later, we notice that she's not true, and then we lose her.

Once we lose the support that Reina is to us, we collapse all by ourselves.

“...Then stay by my side!”

“I’m always by your side. As long as you don’t close your eyes from me, I’ll always be with you. But... can you accept me when I’m only a phenomenon?”

With these words, Reina Kamisu vanished.

No, she didn’t vanish. I simply dismissed her as something that could not exist.

Kamisu Reina is always **here**.

I stand alone by the lake.

I stand alone, without a reason for my suffering.

I stand alone, still suffering.

Suddenly, I recall an earlier thought of mine.

—it’s already too late once you’ve come here.

I raise my head to look at the lake.

Alright—

A monster with tens and hundreds of faces is waiting for me.

Kazuaki Toyoshina

1

It was me who provided the picture for Shizuka Wakui's funeral.

I own more pictures of her than anyone else—more than she did even. Her smiling, her crying, her getting upset... they are all treasures to me.

I raise my head to look at the photo of Shizuka's lovely smile at the altar.

Ah, it's already been a year since she stopped smiling like that.

Ever since that incident a year from now, she hasn't shown that happy and careless smile of hers. Instead, her eyes dulled and her smiles turned into faint motions of her lips.

But I didn't mind. I was willing to wait by her side for her to regain the joy of living and had no plans of searching for another love.

The smell of incense hits my nose.

I feel like I turn empty as the smell soaks into my body; as if it silently bereaves me of myself. What remains of me is a translucent mass of untouchable void.

All colors around me are either black or white, or the green of our school uniforms. Even colors were stolen from me.

Most likely, I'm going to stay in this strangely isolated world from now on.

"Kazuaki," someone says. I turn around to look at a meek Kiichi.

"...You're here?"

"Of course I am. All of our classmates are."

As Kiichi correctly mentioned, our entire class is here. In fact, there are also students from other classes who used to be friends with Shizuka, students I don't even know and even a few students from other schools.

After that incident, Shizuka started to lose her friends one by one and stopped making new ones, until I was the last remaining person at school who was close to her. The friendship between girls is defined by how they relate to each other; at first, her friends accompanied her because of sympathy, but eventually they couldn't keep up with how she changed.

Nevertheless, many old friends have come to Shizuka's funeral and lamented for her sake. Right now, she's the heroine of a tragedy for everyone, which doesn't please me. She was supposed to be *my* heroine, not someone else's.

Therefore, I ignore them and gaze at the picture of her.

Her smile.

Why, truly why, could I not protect that smile?

Where did we make the wrong choice? What should I have done? Was my choice to embrace her wrong? Or was it too late by then anyway?

Why could I not protect the one thing I wanted to protect whatever it would take?

What am I supposed to do now that I have completely and entirely lost Shizuka—my other half—my hope, my purpose?

I am the same as that picture.

The smile depicted and I are but evanescent remnants of the past.

Shizuka's body was transported away.

I didn't get to see her face one last time because of severe damage to her corpse. Had I insisted, I may have gotten permission to take a look, but neither Shizuka nor I would have wished for that.

I mean, they said *damage*. Not injury or scars, boy, but damage.

Hahaha, Shizuka isn't a human being anymore. She's void. Seeing that would only sadden me.

The black and white and green colors have disappeared as I keep standing there, focusing my gaze on the door through which her body was transported.

"Kazuaki-kun," someone says behind me.

"Mrs Wakui."

It's Shizuka's mother, a sorrowful expression on her face. She looks like that because of the loss of her daughter, of course, but part of her melancholy is probably due to sympathy for me.

“Let me give you this,” she says as she holds out her fist. When I present the palm of my hand, she drops something on it.

“Ah—”

It’s a cross choker; a Christmas present I bought for Shizuka two years ago, saving up three months’ worth of pocket money.

“Shizuka was wearing it when she passed away. I... I thought I should give it to you.”

I don’t look up as I listen to her words, and keep gazing closely at the choker in my hand.

She was wearing it at the bitter end? Even though she hasn’t worn it a single time after that incident?

What’s the meaning of this? Why did she wear it at the end?

“I’m sorry,” she suddenly says.

I’m sorry. Words of apology.

“Ah—”

Damn.

Her mother apologized ahead of me.

She took my right to apologize.

It would have been so much easier to blame myself for having failed to ease Shizuka’s pain, for having let her accept such a fate, for being responsible for her death. It would have been so much easier to apologize and crack under the weight.

But her mother didn’t grant me that right.

She took up that position before me.

The only thing I have left now is—

“Uh...”

“UAAAAAAAWHHH!”

—to cry my lungs out.

2

Kiichi and I are on our way to the Shikura public middle school. Normally, there's no reason why a high school student who is neither in a committee nor in a club would go to a completely unfamiliar middle school that requires him to take an express train just because it's slightly too far away to go by bicycle. *Normally*.

“He said he's waiting,” Kiichi explains as he claps his cell phone.

“Okay, thanks man. We're better off if there's someone with us who knows his way around. I hear of a lot of suspicious figures around here lately, I don't want them to suspect us.”

“Well, not like we're any less suspicious.”

“Heh, sounds about right. What's your brother's name, again?”

“Yuji.”

“Yuji Kato it is, huh. Do you resemble each other?”

“I honestly can't tell, but for some reason, he's pretty popular with the girls.”

“You don't look anything like each other, then.”

“...Hey, what's that supposed to mean?”

Responding with a wordless grin, I insert my ticket and go through the barrier. Kiichi looks me in the face in a serious manner.

Aah, I see.

He doesn't understand at all; it's been two weeks since the funeral. I've already had a hard time when she was still alive, so it's child's play for me to put on a cheerful face like this.

"Hey, Kazuaki," he starts when we entered the train, still with a heavy-hearted mien. "I shouldn't be giving you sermons already, but you really shouldn't drag on Wakui-san's death forever, 'kay?"

"Why?"

"Well, dude..." he falters for a moment when I counter his advice dryly. "I know that you loved Wakui-san. Maybe it was mutual love even. But Kazuaki: You weren't a couple, let alone married. Just childhood friends. I mean, look at that cute midget girl who's hitting on you; she's the proof that you're popular. Don't waste that potential."

"Aah... you had that kind of impression of us?"

"Hm? But I'm spot-on, no? You obviously were on the way from friends to lovers."

"Nope."

"Oh come on, maybe that's what *you* thought."

"*We were* a couple."

"...What? For real?"

Ah, of course he wouldn't know about us. We've only known each other since high school.

"We already started going out in the 6th year of elementary school. Don't go telling this around, but we kissed and even made out with each other in middle school."

"...Did you take the next step?"

"No. She always insisted on waiting until we could marry, and I listened to her like a moron."

"I see..." he squeezes out and falls silent.

However, I continue with a stimulated sense of self-mockery.

"She was raped."

"Yeah..." he comments insecurely, with an ambiguous expression that makes it clear that he already heard of this fairly well-known story.

"What do you think is the first thing she said to me when she told me about it?"

"I have no idea..."

"I'm so sorry."

Kiichi glances at me for a moment, and silently lowers his gaze.

"We had no doubts," I continue, "that I would take her virginity, and that she would give me her virginity. No one expected the train to derail from that predestined path. After we had gone through that station, we would enroll at the same university, find a job, and marry. Finally, after death had part us, we

would rest in peace in the same grave. It was an unspoken promise between us that we would follow this path.”

“Mm...”

“But that incident messed our plans up. That clear path laid out before us disappeared into thin air. That’s why she... apologized, thinking it was her fault. Blaming herself for everything.”

“_____”

Kiichi is in complete silence, but I continue:

“She was so churned up inside that she couldn’t even touch me anymore. No, maybe she just had androphobia, who knows. Anyway, she just wouldn’t look at the new path I was trying to build for the two of us. Because of that, we returned to just being friends. Of course, I didn’t plan to leave it that way.”

“I see...” he simply says.

There’s an oppressive silence between us for a while, underlining the tedious rattling of the train. The passengers around us seem to think of everyone else as mere scenery, fiddling with their cell phones or focusing on the music from their headphones.

I begin to speak again.

“I found one of her rapers the other day.”

Kiichi’s head jumps up. He looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

“...What did you do?”

“I killed him.”

He completely loses his tongue.

“I tore off all his clothes, crushed his balls with a stone, beat him up until his face was no longer recognizable, stuffed his mouth with his own shit, peeled off his fingernails one by one, squashed his eyeballs... and while I was doing so, he kicked the bucket.”

“...You’re joking.”

My gaze pinned on the pubs and video shops and fast food restaurants flying by outside the window, I answer him:

“Course I am.”

Fortunately, I don’t know what they look like.

As the train starts to slow down, I look outside and think:

Come to think of it... I haven’t had Gyudon in a while.

The Shikura Middle School is built amidst the living quarters; finally arriving there, we spot a bunch of students playing soccer and baseball in the cramped school grounds.

Five minutes after Kiichi gives him a call, Yuji shows up at the entrance gate, still in sports gear, subliminally remarking that he was in the middle of working out. With his large and athletic build it stands to reason that he would be popular.

“Let me cut straight to the chase: The three students who committed suicide were in your class, is that right, Yuji-kun?”

“Yes, we had quite the chaos going on here because of that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Things like no one wanting to take the blame, getting a new class teacher, and so on.”

Three students taking their lives is a big problem, indeed. Added to that, they’re in the middle of puberty (not that I’m much older), too, which doesn’t mix well and allows for even more problems.

“I heard the gist from Kiichi, so I’ll delve right into the details: What do you consider the reason why they committed suicide?”

Yuji-kun ponders. “I think each had their own problems, really. The girl of the first incident didn’t have any friends and wasn’t exactly treated well in class, and the guy who killed himself next blamed himself for the death of the first victim.”

“...Ah, so they didn’t commit suicide independently, but rather the first suicide triggered a chain?”

“...That’s my view, yes.”

“All right...”

When I heard that three students had killed themselves at different times and in different places, I suspected the same irregularity as with Shizuka’s case; after all, you wouldn’t just commit suicide just because you are confronted with the topic.

If, however, their cases are interconnected and can be traced back, they may not be regular, but they’re by no means irregular either.

It seems like this trace, which I tracked because I found that Shizuka was investigating these incidents, ends here.

“Can you show me your classroom, Yuji-kun?” I propose just in case.

“Sure. But please try not to catch anyone’s eye. It’s a hassle to explain ourselves.”

Yuji-kun and I (Kiichi stayed outside) entered the school building. He then showed me around, guiding me to relevant places like their classroom, the landing of the stairway that leads to the roof, where the first victim was often seen, and so on. By the way, the place where I wanted to go most, the roof, was closed, perhaps because of those incidents.

“So? Did you learn anything?” Yuji-kun asks before the door to the roof.

“Hm...” As expected, the places didn’t make an impression on me.

“Can I ask you something on the matter, too?” he responds to my silence.

“What is it?”

“Why are you investigating in the first place, Toyoshina-san?”

After giving it some thought, I reply, “I had a girlfriend.”

“My brother told me something along those lines. He said she... committed suicide,” he explains, faltering a little before squeezing out the word *suicide*. “Ah, do you suspect that it wasn’t suicide but murder? And that it was the same culprit for the cases at this—”

“Haha, no, that’s not it. To be honest, I think she had a proper reason to commit suicide.”

“But then why?”

“A few days before she died, she started to behave strangely. Her condition abruptly worsened as if she had stepped on the gas and fallen from a cliff. In other words, I’m investigating the reason why she suddenly stepped on the gas, you know.”

“But is there—” Yuji-kun starts, but cuts off mid-sentence, making a grimace.

“What?”

“Ah, no, please forget about it. I don’t want to be rude.”

“It’s okay, I’m curious.”

He looks me in the eyes repeatedly before he finally gives in with a nod. “Um... I just wondered if there is a point in doing all this?”

A point.

A point, hm?

“I’m... I’m sorry! My tongue slipped!”

“No, it’s okay,” I assure him and add, “...There is no point, I suppose.”

“None at all?” he asks in surprise.

“She did go to strange places in her last days, sure, and she started to become delusional. Maybe that accelerated her death.”

“...It sounds meaningful to me to look into that, no?”

“Nope, not at all. I know for a fact that the reason why she committed suicide has nothing to do with all that.”

“...No meaning... but then why do you go out of your way to investigate?”

I gaze at Yuji-kun. Looking at his genuinely puzzled face, I’m sure he has never lost a beloved person.

“Because I have nothing else to do, maybe?”

“But that’s not true, is it...? Maybe it’s a bit early, but you could start preparing for the university exams, or you could be—”

“No, nothing,” I interrupt him with a firm voice, “I have nothing else to do.”

The path I tried to rebuild was irreversibly destroyed. I’m only drifting away in an empty space now.

All I can do is follow Shizuka’s footsteps, even though there is nothing ahead of them. It’s simply the only signpost left to me, having lost ground.

“...”

It seems that Yuji-kun remains unconvinced, but so be it; there’s no need for him to understand. If he does, it will be once he’s in a similar situation.

I look around once more and let out a deep sigh. It seems that there’s nothing to be found here. It’s not so easy to find the fragments left behind by Shizuka.

I take her choker out of my pocket and gaze at it.

Shizuka, why did you put that choker on before you died? Is there a meaning behind that? Or none at all? I can't even tell that much, even though we've been together for most of our lives.

"Well, if that's all, shall we leave?" he proposes.

I nod in agreement. There's nothing to be gained here.

As I climb down the stairs, I remember that there was one other thing I was meaning to ask.

"Aah, before I forget: Do you happen to know that name, Yuji-kun?" I ask without any expectations.

"What name?"

"Um, lemme see... 'Reina Kamisu.'"

As I finish saying that name, Yuji-kun abruptly stops.

"...Where did you learn about that name?" he asks, surprising me with his reaction. His face is mildly tensed.

"Um, I heard it from my deceased girlfriend."

He stays silent, his gaze still fixed on me.

Huh? What's up with him? Did he know the name after all? No, that wouldn't explain why he would react like this.

Which means that...?

"I don't know a person by that name, but to tell the truth, I did come across that name."

"Where...?"

Reluctantly, Yuji-kun answers me, "The victims mentioned it."

That means that...? Hold on, I need to think.

Yuji-kun heard the name “Reina Kamisu” from the suicide victims. Victims—that’s plural. Furthermore, he doesn’t know Reina Kamisu himself. However, that does still not explain why he would react in such a strange fashion.

That means—

“...You don’t know Reina Kamisu,” I start.

“I don’t.”

“And the other students who are alive don’t know her, either.”

“...Exactly.”

“However... All the suicide victims, including my girlfriend Shizuka, knew Reina Kamisu.”

Yuji-kun nods awkwardly.

“I’m not sure if all three of them knew her, but at least the first two victims did mention that name.”

“I see.”

“The first victim referred to that name as her best friend, while the second one mentioned it in his suicide note as the person who drove him into suicide, mistaking Reina Kamisu for the first victim.”

“He mistook her? How could that happen? How can you mistake the name of the person who drove you into death?”

“I thought so, too... but his suicide note is clearly referring to the first victim! I suppose he knew both of them, since they were close friends, and somehow confused them with each other.”

“But...”

“Yes, I know. That only explains why the first two victims mentioned that name, but not why your girlfriend knew her, too.”

Exactly.

Shizuka and I have known each other for most of our lives because her family’s house is just across the street. We have admitted the same schools from kindergarten to high school. In other words, she had just as little to do with the Shikura middle school as me.

There’s no reason why a high school student who is neither in a committee nor in a club would go to a completely unfamiliar middle school that is slightly too far away to go by bicycle, but not *that* far away. Similarly, there’s no reason why she would get to know the students from there.

“Shizuka was acquainted with ‘Reina Kamisu’ even though you guys don’t know her and even though she had far less points of contact with the other suicide victims. And everyone who knew Reina Kamisu—”

“—is dead now.”

The pieces are starting to come together, forming a ring that connects all of the victims.

An incredibly twisted ring that should not even exist.

Come to think of it, Shizuka and the other victims had no doubt proper reasons to commit suicide. But they only had reasons.

If for example they had actually been killed, they still would have had proper reasons to commit suicide.

In other words, the fact that they had reasons does in no way rule out the existence of a third person who may have influenced them.

No... don't jump to conclusions. I have to consider that Shizuka did some research about this school; maybe she learned about 'Reina Kamisu' in the process.

That being said... that would be an eerie chain of coincidences.

"Toyoshina-san," Yuji-kun starts, "I'll try asking around in school about Reina Kamisu tomorrow."

"Please do so."

Where will this ring lead me? I think as I gaze in the air.

Suddenly, my vision turns blurry as if a drop of water had fallen on my eyes. But that's how it's supposed to be. The world is full of mosaics that conceal the truth from our eyes. We don't really see anything. Perhaps, we arrive at what we think is the answer even though it's based on flawed logic. At the end of the day, three-dimensional beings like us cannot look across a three-dimensional world.

My vision is always blurry, I'm always blind.

Ah, just damn it. Someone tell me what I'm supposed to do! What did Shizuka want me to do? How can I escape fate? What is 1+1? Why is the earth rotating?

Why is the earth round? What is gravity? What is magnetic force? What is the meaning of life? Who is Reina Kamisu?

I know that there's no clear answer, so just make up one for me. Just tell me the answer using a valid logic. There should be one, and if there is one, please tell me.

Give me the right answer.

Give me the right answer.

Save me!

Save me before I drown in the swamp that I'm struggling against, that is drawing life out of me!

Suddenly.

I see a silhouette on the landing where I was moments ago.

A person.

“—Huh?”

—It's 'Shizuka.'

“...? What's wrong, Toyoshina-san?” Yuji-kun asks in response to the sudden gasp I let out.

“L-Look, there!” I groan as I point at Shizuka. He traces the direction I'm indicating with his eyes and narrows them.

“...Um, I see nothing.”

“T-That's impossible!”

I turn around to the landing once more.

“Ah...”

Shizuka’s not there. Of course not. She’s dead. She’s not among us anymore.

“...Sorry, forget about it.”

“You must be tired.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

I’m tired. Yeah. Absolutely.

Otherwise I can’t believe it.

“Haha...”

I mean, really, how could I otherwise believe that I, who loved Shizuka more than anyone else, would mistake someone for her.

Shizuka isn’t among us. She’s not here.

Therefore, that girl over there isn’t Shizuka.

That girl over there with an absurdly beautiful smile, who resembles Shizuka, is—

“I’m pleased to meet you.”

—Reina Kamisu.

3

What was the most important thing for me within my school life?

The answer is obvious; and it’s something that’s already lost.

School right now is just like a hamburger restaurant that doesn’t offer meat. They might introduce tofu instead, but that just doesn’t cut it.

For me, at least, there is not a single thing of import at school. The only reason I'm still here is because of habit—a routine I'm programmed to follow— a daily ritual I conduct for my family. It's my duty to assume the role of a lazy student for the teachers, an upbeat friend for Kiichi and the others, and an admirable senior for Hozumi-chan. That being said, it's not just an act I'm playing; every moment I spend in these roles, I'm no one else but my true self. There is no falseness in that.

But whenever I'm not forced into one of these roles, I'm confronted with the gaping emptiness inside me.

Well, no surprise. My single most important role has become redundant, and the part inside me that was reserved for that role has vanished.

After my classes end, I start putting the chairs onto the desks to wipe the floor—which is just another routine I'm forced to repeat over and over.

As I'm doing my work, I suddenly recall my short encounter with Reina Kamisu that ended before I could even exchange a word with her.

She resembled Shizuka more than anyone I have ever met. And while she is definitely not a person, she's not an illusion either. Reina Kamisu has without a doubt interacted with Shizuka and the other students, and driven them into committing suicide. I am 100% convinced of that. However, that conviction unsettles me.

Be reasonable, Kazuaki. What makes me so sure that she is really who I think she is? There is nothing that supports my sentiment; I have no information whatsoever that would allow me to recognize Reina Kamisu. I don't know her appearance, her traits, her personality—nothing.

But the girl I met there is Reina Kamisu.

Why did that answer pop out and click with me? What is the meaning of this?

“Senpai!”

Senpai. For students in lower grades everyone's a senpai, but from the context of my daily routine I can deduct that this refers to me. I turn around to the window adjacent to the corridor.

“Hey, Hozumi-chan,” I say. She answers me with a smile. “And Yoshino-chan,” I add, spotting her friend next to her, who in turn bows her head silently.

Yoshino-chan hardly ever talks to me. I suppose she's uncomfortable in the company of the other sex. In fact, when I met her alone on the corridor the other day, she ran away from me like lightning. Of course, that incident got me thinking a little, but against my concerns, it seems like she doesn't actually dislike me.

“You're looking dark. Is something wrong?” Hozumi-chan asks with a smile.

“Hm?” While I don't think that they know her, I decide to give it a try nonetheless. “You don't happen to know Reina Kamisu, do you?”

“Rehma... Kameesu?” she repeats like a parrot and turns her head to her companion. Yoshino-chan wordlessly shakes her head. “Is she famous or something?”

“No, no.”

“From our school?”

“No.”

“Hm? Then why did you think that we might know her?”

“I didn’t expect you to be familiar with her. Just asking, really.”

Right, they can’t know Reina Kamisu. All who know her are dead by now.

All who know her are dead...?

Including me? Haha, aptly put indeed but not funny.

“Okay then, I have to get going.”

“Ah... um, do you mind if I tag along...?” Hozumi-chan asks.

“No, I’m sorry, but...”

“Okay...” she says with blatant disappointment.

In order to soothe my conscience, I explain myself, immediately regretting that slip of the tongue.

“There’s something I want to investigate.”

“Investigate?”

There you have it: Now I got her curious. Should I answer her...? I know that she has a crush on me, so she would probably follow me along everywhere if I were honest to her. I don’t want to torment her by giving her false hopes.

However, I then notice that telling her the truth would actually be helpful in that matter.

“I’m investigating those recent suicide cases.”

“Ah...”

As I thought, her face darkens in response to the word “suicide” and the memory of Shizuka Wakui looming behind.

“I see...”

Hozumi-chan’s approaches have declined after Shizuka’s death. Originally, I thought that she would secretly welcome her death and try everything to take advantage of the gap in my heart.

I was wrong.

By that I don’t only mean that Hozumi-chan was in fact sad about Shizuka’s death; she was also sensible enough to notice that Shizuka’s value to me hadn’t changed a bit. And because of that she was let down. Probably.

“...But they don’t talk a lot about those incidents on TV, do they?” she says, getting a grip on herself.

“Yeah. Suicide’s not a special topic anymore, after all. Besides, I think there are some regulations because it could give people bad ideas.”

“I have a feeling that it only gets into the news if it concerns a celebrity or if it’s some real bad incident...”

“Real bad...” mutters Yoshino-chan, joining our conversation for the first time today. “Hozumi-chan? Do you remember that incident at the Junseiwa high where several students jumped off a roof?”

Yoshino-chan has the habit of talking to me via Hozuki-chan.

“Hm...? Well, of course. You’re always reminding me that you picked our school because of that incident, aren’t you? Your middle school was also there, right?”

“Y-Yes...”

Yoshino-chan went to the Junseiwa School? But that’s a textbook example of a girls-only school for rich ladies. No wonder that she’s so sensitive to boys.

Anyway, now that she mentions it, I remember hearing about that incident quite a while ago, although it had slipped my mind until now.

“Could you me more about it?” I ask her.

“E, erm... I heard that it started with the student council president jumping from the top of a building... Several other students then followed her and jumped off as well...” Yoshino-chan replies looking elsewhere and gradually growing quieter as she speaks.

“How long ago was that...?”

“A little more than three years... I... think...”

I’m surprised I could forget such a huge debacle; or did they really regulate the media so that that incident wasn’t made famous?

Yoshino-chan, noticing my confusion, adds with a flushed face, “The media did not point out the number of suicides because that would harm the long history of the Junseiwa School.”

I see.

“I want to learn more about that incident. Do you know of someone I could ask...?”

“Um...”

“Hm?”

“My sister was there at the time, so she might be able to provide information. But...” Yoshino-chan says.

“But...?”

“It is a topic that she hates to talk about. So much that she has not even told me about it. I doubt that she will be of any help.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes...”

Perhaps her sister was not entirely unrelated to the mass suicide. Although considering the scale of that incident, it might very well be possible that there was *something* that concerned the entire campus behind the scenes.

Something.

For example—Reina Kamisu.

“Can’t we just ask one of her friends if your sis doesn’t want to talk, Yoshinon?” suggests Hozumi-chan as she interrupts us.

“I’m afraid that my sister didn’t really have any friends in high school,” Yoshino-chan answers her with a bitter smile—behaving entirely different than when talks to me.

“Then how about this: I’m sure your sister has a graduation album, right?” I ask.

“Ah, um, yes...” she nods in a tense manner.

“Could you show *that* to me?”

“Err, hm...”

She doesn’t seem bent on it.

“Just snatch it when she’s not looking, Yoshinon!”

“H-Huh?! You’re joking, right...?”

“Please, Yoshino-chan,” I ask as well, holding my hands together like in a prayer. She seems to be rather troubled, but I can’t be choosing my means.

“M-Mmm... I will try.”

“Yay! Thanks a bunch.”

“B-But there are no addresses and phone numbers in there...! To prevent data abuse because it is a famous school...”

“Okay. But even a photo might give me a clue.”

“A clue...?” Hozumi-chan asks with a slightly trembling voice. My face when Shizuka told me about those “humanoid energies” must have looked the same as Hozumi-chan’s now.

“Er, well—”

A clue concerning Reina Kamisu; that’s what I’m looking for, but I can’t tell her that. Unlike Shizuka, I’m perfectly aware of how I appear from an objective viewpoint.

I have discovered a non-human being that promotes suicide, which is neither a ghost nor an illusion, but an enigmatic phenomenon. Moreover, that being is not only incredibly beautiful, but also resembles Shizuka. And she’s the one who killed Shizuka!

Yeah, there’s no way they would buy that.

I turn my glance at Hozumi-chan, who's sending me a worried look. I have to come up with some excuse. I could tell them that my first love went to that school, and that... no, they can tell it's a lie from the flow of our conversation. Besides, they know that Shizuka was my everything.

“—Err...”

Hozumi-chan is growing even more worried. Quick! However...

“Kazuaki?”

It just happened that Kiichi showed up from behind them. Thank god.

“What's the matter?” I ask in the most casual voice I could produce.

“I just got an e-mail from my brother. He wants you to contact him.”

“Yuji-kun wants me to contact him?”

Did he get around to asking the other students about Reina Kamisu?

After getting Yuji-kun's phone number from Kiichi, I walked away from the group (Hozumi-chan seemed not amused) and hid inside a compartment in the restroom—we are not allowed to openly use our cell phones at school—and called the number.

“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Toyoshina.”

“Ah, hello Toyoshina-san.”

“Kiichi told me that you wanted to talk to me. What's up?”

“Yes. As promised, I asked around my schoolmates about Reina Kamisu today.”

“Oh, thanks a lot.”

“Don’t mention it. Anyway, I found someone who might know her.”

“For real?! But what do you mean by ‘might’?”

“You’ll understand. I managed to persuade that person to stay at school until you arrive, so may I ask you to come around in the course of the day?”

“Of course.”

“Okay then. We’re waiting. Drop me a message when you arrive. See you.”

“Okay, thanks again. See you.”

I end the call with a sigh of relief.

There’s someone else besides me who knows Reina Kamisu...? Someone who’s also “going to die?” And to that person she also looks like my Shizuka?

“Huh...?” I gasp with a certain doubt in my mind that appeared when I imagined how Reina Kamisu must appear to other people.

Reina Kamisu.

Reina Kamisu resembles Shizuka.

...That’s strange. It could be a plain coincidence, of course, but I can’t help but feel that there’s more to it. Why does she resemble Shizuka?

But then—

Did Shizuka’s Reina Kamisu also resemble herself?

I don’t think so. My gut feeling tells me otherwise.

Wouldn't it be more plausible to assume that Reina Kamisu is customized to look like Shizuka in my eyes?

Those jeans look great on you, but they're a bit too long, aren't they? Let me cut them down for your size. Let me adjust them to you.

However, what are the implications of that assumption if it's correct?

Reina Kamisu is not defined by her visual data. What does this imply? What is she ultimately, anyway?

My brain can't follow my train of thought. I lack the immunity against incomprehensible phenomena. I start to repeat her name meaninglessly in my head. Reina Kamisu, Kamisu Reina, Reina Kamisu, Kamisu Reina. Again. Reina Kamisu, Kamisu Reina. Again. Kamisu Reina, Reina Kamisu, Kamisu Reina. Loop. Reina Kamisu, Kamisu Reina.

I leave the restroom, only to find Hozumi-chan waiting by herself for me, her look still discontent.

“What’s the matter...?” I ask.

“...Senpai. Are you going somewhere today?”

“Did you listen?”

“I did, but I couldn’t quite follow because I only heard your voice.”

“I see...”

“Senpai?”

“What is it?”

“—Who is Reina Kamisu?”

She gets right to the heart of the matter, leaving me speechless for a moment.

It seems like she could filter out the crucial keyword from our phone conversation...

“I’ve always been concerned with you, Senpai, that’s why I can tell that this ‘Reina Kamisu’ is at the core of your worries, and that all your worries are connected to Wakui-senpai in some way or another. Please be honest with me. Does that ‘Reina Kamisu’ have something to do with Wakui-senpai’s death?”

“...Where’s Yoshino-chan?” I ask as I avert my gaze from her and search for her companion.

“She went home. I told her that I couldn’t tag along today,” she answers my question, her strong and fixed look forbidding me to look away from her.

I could tell from her gaze that she would not let go of me today anymore, and inside her clear and beautiful eyes, I could see myself: an exhausted, cowardly, idiotic, remorseful, hopeless reflection of myself.

How can she like me with those ever so clear and pretty eyes of hers? You must be blind, Hozumi-chan...

“Hozumi-chan...”

Confronted with her pure eyes, I realize that I owe her some sincerity.

“What is it?”

At this rate, she is not going to ask. She will just follow me to the Shikura middle school and she won’t give up on me. She’s not even thinking of giving up.

Hozumi-chan is a lovely girl. She can experience as many wonderful romances as she wants. There's no reason for her to constrict herself because of me; she could easily find a love where she can behave more freely and naturally.

I can't leave her at this.

That's why I feel that I owe her a sincere yet cruel answer to her feelings.

"I can't see you as someone of the other sex," I say. Her eyes open in response to my contextless revelation. "I never will. You will never get a special place in my heart."

"S-Senpai...?"

"My heart belongs to Shizuka alone. I'm hers from head to toe, and for all eternity. The two of us were one. You can't replace her. You can't satisfy me by any stretch. Do you finally get it? *This is the kind of person I am. I will never be what you want me to be, never.*"

Hozumi-chan is left completely speechless and just keeps opening and closing her mouth. Insecurely she gazes at me, her head crimson, her fist clenched, and her body trembling.

Hozumi-chan is in puberty—the period of life where you are overly self-conscious and afraid to be hurt by someone, or god forbid, by someone you like.

Despite all that, I didn't keep back from hurting her so horribly.

Was there no other way? Perhaps. But I felt that only by using harsh words could I answer her strong gaze.

Hozumi-chan. Too strong feelings always lead to ruin, whether they are beautiful or hideous. Remember that.

Just look what has become of me now that Shizuka's gone.

"Do you still want to come with me, Hozumi-chan?"

The answer is obvious. I don't expect to be hearing anything from her, looking at her insecure and hurt look.

Which is why—

"I do."

Hearing a determined and quick answer struck me as way more unbelievable than the existence of Reina Kamisu.

"I do want to come with you," she repeated.

Even though she must be horribly hurt.

Even though she can barely hold her tears back.

Even though her voice is trembling hard.

And yet she managed to regain a strong light in her eyes and answered my question with a determined voice.

That moment I realized—

"Ah..."

—This was the answer I was looking for.

This is what I was supposed to do back then.

I'm buried beneath an avalanche of remorse. Unable to move and speak, all I can do is remember that day over and over. Surrounded by cold remorse.

On that day, I embraced Shizuka.

“...Don’t touch me.”

Until now, I thought I had committed a mistake. I thought that everything was already too late by that time.

But I was wrong.

The real mistake I made was—to let go of her.

I was supposed to keep embracing her, no matter how much she struggled to break free. I was supposed to cling to her no matter what... like Hozumi-chan did to me.

“...Don’t touch me.”

I gave up because of those words, in the illusion that I could not do anything to stop her tears. I fooled myself into believing that everything was too late.

I simply was a coward: I feared to be hurt any more because she'd rejected me. I pretended to share her pain when I really couldn't do what I wanted to, what I was supposed to.

I was the only one in the position to achieve something, and yet I didn't take action.

I take her cross choker out of my pocket.

I've finally realized why she'd worn this at the very end, what I was meant to do. At last.

As I hold tight of her choker, I think:

—Forgive me for not being with you all the time.

I look at the blushed girl in front of me. I misunderstood her. I thought that I was just a replaceable part in a clumsy, pubescent love story she pictured to herself. But that's not true. She's just like me.

Sadly.

“Let’s go, Hozumi-chan.”

She nods.

It’s a shame that you still can’t save me.

Because you aren’t Shizuka.

Thanks to the e-mail I had given him beforehand, Yuji-kun and another boy were already waiting for us before the entrance gate when we arrived at the Shikura middle school.

“Hey.”

“Hello.”

As maybe expected, that boy’s look turned out to be... vacant. He just gazed into space while Yuji-kun and I were greeting each other.

“And who are you?” Yuji-kun asks Hozumi-chan.

“My name is Hozumi Shiiki. I’m one grade below Toyoshina-senpai... and older than you, mind you,” she adds because of his somewhat cheeky attitude toward her.

...Well, it's not that obvious if you look at your height...

I turn my attention toward the boy who may know Reina Kamisu. Upon realizing that a self-introduction is in place, he mutters without a shadow of a smile:

“I’m Atsushi Kogure.”

“Frankly, I don’t know anything nor would I remember if I did,” Atsushi-kun starts. “I suffer from amnesia.”

Amnesia? Sounds like the protagonist of some drama show.

Having heard of it so many times in fiction, I don’t feel a lot of surprise even though it’s the first time I’m confronted with amnesia in reality.

I give Yuji-kun a questioning look. He nods. It seems like he’s telling the truth.

No wonder that his look is vacant. He is vacant in the true sense of the word.

“When did you lose your memory?” Hozumi-chan asks.

Earlier in the train, I disclosed all my thoughts to Hozumi-chan—that was my way of paying her respect—and she believed me, at least by the look of it. Believability aside, she realized that I wasn’t lying to her.

“Around last month,” Atsushi-kun answers indifferently.

Last month... that's around the time Shizuka's delusions got out of control.

"Unless my memory fails me, it happened between the second and third suicide case," Yuji-kun adds.

"I hear that there are different kinds of amnesia. What about yours, Atsushi-kun?"

After a short thinking pause, he answers, "I can't tell why I've lost my memory, but apart from the basic everyday knowledge like language, I've forgotten everything. At first I thought the large scar on my chest was the reason, but I heard that I've already had this when I was little."

"Did you forget your name?"

"Yes, I did."

"I see... I'll keep my fingers crossed that you regain your memory." Hozumi-chan says in an attempt to cheer him up. However, Atsushi-kun shakes his head.

She inclines her head, puzzled.

"My mother... or my aunt, to be precise, advised me not to regain my memories. Besides, I feel absolutely certain that they won't return."

"Why are you so sure?" Hozumi-chan asks, still puzzled.

"There's no actual reason. I just feel that way... I think that Atsushi Kogure died."

"Died...? But you're here, right before our eyes."

“No, I’m not exactly Atsushi Kogure. His personality died back then, and I was put into his body instead as a makeshift substitute because the vacancy had to be filled. I’m another person. I’m just using his name for convenience’s sake.”

I try imagining myself without any of my memories, even without those of Shizuka.

No memories of Shizuka? That’s not me. That’s not Kazuaki Toyoshina, but an entirely different person.

Okay, Atsushi-kun has a point.

“All right, let me get to the point—”

“About that,” Yuji-kun cuts in. “Atsushi won’t admit to knowing Reina Kamisu.”

“Huh, really?”

Now that he mentions it, though, it’s obvious that Atsushi-kun wouldn’t remember knowing Reina Kamisu if he has lost his memory, unless he met her during the short time span after that.

However, seeing the expression clued on his face, I have absolutely no doubts that he must have come in contact with her at some point in time: The blank look on his face has disappeared. Instead, he is gritting his teeth and furrowing his brow.

He definitely knows her. And the misfortune she brings.

“...Atsushi-kun. You know Reina Ka—”

“I don’t,” he cuts me short with a visibly bad temper.

...It doesn’t look like he’ll answer me this way. Let’s see if I can trick him into giving me the info I need.

“Oh, I see, so it was Reina Kamisu who erased your memory,” I say, provokingly.

His eyes widen for an instant! and his face becomes even grimmer. I must be near the mark.

“Okay, Atsushi-kun. One more thing—”

“I...!” he interrupts me again, shouting this time. Embarrassed by our surprised glances, he continues, “I don’t remember anything. Really.”

“But...”

“It’s just that that name sends a chill down my spine.”

“Still, your reaction isn’t normal.”

“Even if I did come in contact with that Reina Kamisu... no, I probably did, ‘Atsushi Kogure’ did. But I don’t know anything. Atsushi Kogure no longer exists, so leave me be! Why does everyone keep asking me those questions?!”

“Hm?” I mutter, puzzled by his concluding sentence.

“Do you mean us by ‘everyone’?”

“Of course. And that strange girl that suddenly talked to me the other day.”

Strange girl...?

“Who are you talking about?”

“I don’t know who she is! Well, not that I know anyone at all. She suddenly walked up to me and said, ‘As I thought. You died, didn’t you?’ I guess we met somewhere before...”

As I thought. You died, didn’t you?...?

“Hozumi-chan?”

“Yes?”

“What impression would you get from Atsushi-kun if you passed by him on the street?”

“Huh? Uhm... not a special one... at most, I would feel that he’s a somewhat unusual person.”

“...Agreed,” I nod.

Hozumi-chan’s right. The girl he met was indeed strange; what she said is not something you hear a lot from strangers. Odd people like that are rare, but I remember hearing something to the same effect only recently..

It seems like that girl mistook him for a dead person; in other words, she thinks that she has the ability to perceive dead people. As ghosts? As humanoid energies?

A fit of disgust assaults me from inside my chest, sending a burning, black lump up my throat. I feel nauseated, my fingers are trembling, my eyes are burning, my throat is sore.

“Do you... know her name?” I ask as I press my hand against my chest.

“Why do you care?” Atsushi-kun snaps back.

He pisses me off.

“Just fucking tell me!” I yell, surprising not only him, but also the other two. That pisses me off just as much.
“So?! Do you know her name or not?!”

“...She did tell me her name... I think she called herself Watarai, or Wakui... ah, her first name was Shizuka.”

Ah—

So this is where it started?

With this, I can finally connect the dots of this warped ring.

There's no doubting it:

Shizuka became infected with “Reina Kamisu” from Atsushi-kun.

“Atsushi-kun. Spit what you know about Reina Kamisu,” I urge him again.

“...I don’t know anything for crying out loud.”

I grab him by the collar.

“Nothing, you say? Are you *shitting* me?! You know her! If you don’t, *remember!* Want me to jog your memory, eh? I hear a shock treatment works miracles?”

“C-Calm down, Toyoshina-san!” Yuji-kun urges as he grabs my arm.

“Hands off!” I yell, glaring at him.

However, he doesn’t let go of my arm. He’s strong. It hurts. FUCK. IT HURTS. Let go of me, jackass! I have to learn the truth about Reina Kamisu! Whatever it takes! Why would I let a little shit like you stop me?!

“S-Stop it, senpai!” Hozumi-chan grabs my arm as well.

What? You team up against me? Just when I thought you’ve understood me a little, Hozumi-chan. What a mistake. You’re just a stranger, after all.

“Hands off, bitch!”

She lets go of me.

What?! If something like that already scares you off, then don't try to stop me from the start! Don't follow me around from the start! What?! Don't look at me with such teary eyes—

“...”

I let go of Atsushi-kun.

“—I'm sorry,” I apologize. “I'm sorry!” I apologize to the three of them.

I'm despicable. Horrible.

Not only did I lose my composure just because Atsushi-kun happened to associate with Reina Kamisu and got rough with him, I also hurt Hozumi-chan again. She's never going to forget that I insulted her. She's never going to forget this temporary burst of hatred against her. With the single word “bitch” I have hurt her more than the sharpest blade could, even though I was aware of these consequences.

I'm scum. A lowlife. Trash. A maggot. I should just die.

There is a silence among us; everyone keeps their mouth shut.

What? Where are your reproaches? Cut out those looks of sympathy! They only remind me of my own foolishness...

“Toyoshina-san...” Atsushi-kun breaks the silence. “I do really not remember Reina Kamisu.”

“Yeah... I believe you. I'm sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. I may not remember her, but I do spot a horrifying... specter every so often for a split second.”

Could it be that this is...?

“Judging by my fright, it might indeed be Reina Kamisu. However, that is all I know. The only other thing I can tell is that—”

“—she is absurdly beautiful.”

—It’s her, Reina Kamisu.

The specter that is following him around, and that erased *Atsushi Kogure*’s memory, is doubtlessly Reina Kamisu.

You only get that absurd impression from her; at least, I haven’t met any other people of such beauty up to now.

In other words, “Reina Kamisu” is a phenomenon that gives off the impression of being “absurdly beautiful.”

She’s a phenomenon that creates the exact same impression in all of us.

“...Senpai?” Hozumi-chan taps me. I bend down to her height. “Looks like the two of you met the same Reina Kamisu, doesn’t it?” she whispers into my ear.

I answer with a whisper as well, “What makes you think so?”

“Well, because he got the same impression as you.”

“Hozumi-chan,” I start and proceed to correcting her, “It’s the other way around.”

“Hey, why don’t you let us in on what you’re whispering?” Yuji-kun interrupts us.

“Never mind,” I say and turn at Atsushi-kun.

“Atsushi-kun. Could you tell us what impression you got from the strange girl that talked to you?”

“...Well, I suppose you could say she was fairly pretty.”

“Was she your type?”

“No, not at all,” he replies without hesitating.

“Okay, so did she look anything like the specter you’re afraid of?”

“...I’m pretty sure she didn’t, although I can’t give you my word on it.”

“I see...,” I mutter and give Hozumi-chan a look. She seems to be puzzled by the discrepancy of facts. “Yuji-kun? Can you tell me more about the three students who committed suicide?”

“Sure, I’ll try.”

“Give me as much details as possible, please.”

“Hm... I didn’t know them too well, though...”

“I don’t mind, just tell me what you know,” I reassure him.

“Okay. The first victim was Fumi Saito, a student that didn’t stand out at all in class. She was falsely accused of having stolen someone’s wallet, and that’s probably why she eventually killed herself.”

I doubt that the true reason was that straightforward, but that doesn’t matter right now.

“She didn’t have any friends, except for Reina Kamisu, to whom she was very close,” I add.

“Though there’s no proof that she really was friends with Reina Kamisu, but it seems that way judging by her statements.”

“Got it. What about the second one?”

“The second victim was Kyouhei Kimura. Committed suicide because he blamed himself for Saito-san’s death.”

“He must have been craving for forgiveness from Saito-san. But she was death. Therefore he apologized to Reina Kamisu instead.”

“...? Toyoshina-san?” Yuji-kun asks, dumbfounded.

“Never mind.”

“The third victim was Yuu Mizuhara. She was involved in the suicide of the previous two students, and that fact strained her mentally to the point that she claimed that a ghost had killed the other two. She was under the delusion that she would be killed as well, and then committed suicide.”

“She was cornered. She didn’t want to admit the blame. That’s why she resorted to making up another cause—a ghost. A ghost that is Reina Kamisu,” I add yet again.

“...What’s up with those comments, seriously?” Yuji-kun asks.

“Oh, just ignore them. By the way, Atsushi-kun?”

“Yes?”

“You suffered quite a lot in the past, didn’t you?”

“So I heard.”

“And you died. Through Reina Kamisu.”

“...Maybe you can say that.”

As for Shizuka... it’s obvious: She was yearning for a reason for her misfortune—and had Reina Kamisu provide her with one.

They all imposed different roles on Reina Kamisu.

More importantly, I highly doubt that the appearance required from her for those roles would be the exact same in terms of stature, age, face, and so forth. And yet, both Atsushi-kun and I thought that she was “absurdly beautiful.”

All right, so Reina Kamisu, as I perceive her, resembles Shizuka. I know for a fact, however, that while Shizuka certainly didn’t dislike her own looks, she didn’t consider herself all that pretty.

Now, what if we assumed that Reina Kamisu was the exact same person for all of us? Would we all find the same appearance “absurdly beautiful” despite the difference of tastes?

Right, as I said: It’s the other way around.

She gives us the same impression only because she looks different for everyone. “Reina Kamisu” is specifically adjusted to look “absurdly beautiful” in our eyes.

Hold on, but then why—

Why is it that we all call this phenomenon “Reina Kamisu” when she appears differently for everyone?

The answer is—

“—Yuji-kun. Atsushi-kun. Let’s call it a day,” I say with a wave of my hand, take Hozumi-chan’s hand while she’s still baffled, and turn around to take my leave.

“Ah, hey, wait a sec!”

“What’s the matter, Yuji-kun...?” I ask in response.

“It sounds like you found something out about this Reina Kamisu; would you mind telling us?”

“...Just silly musings, really.”

“I don’t mind, so...?”

I waver. If I say nothing, chances are that he will keep nagging me about it. After all, he must be terribly eager to learn the truth behind the name that keeps coming up in the recent miseries of his classmates.

And that’s exactly why it’s dangerous to tell him.

“I noticed that there’s a fitting other word for ‘Reina Kamisu.’”

“Which would be...?”

“Angel.”

Yuji-kun remains unimpressed.

“What noun describes a beautiful woman that appears before people who are to die? ‘Angel’ fits the bill nicely, no?”

“I guess so...” he says without an additional remark. He still seems discontent, but I can recognize a sign of resignation in his face.

Good. It worked. That should put a stop to his interest in my findings regarding Reina Kamisu.

“Okay then, goodbye,” I say.

“Yes, goodbye. Hope to see you again sometime.”

I briefly wave my hand toward them. Yuji-kun waves back but Atsushi-kun has already turned away from me.
Atsushi Kogure.

Could you say that he got away with a black eye? Or did he die as he said himself?

Anyway. An ‘angel’ I called her...?

What a laughable yet strangely fitting simile. If she showed up with a halo above her head and a pair of wings on her back, I might actually believe that blatant lie myself. It would be so much easier if I just went with that and quit thinking.

“Senpai...” Hozumi-chan suddenly starts to speak after a while. I already knew what she was going to ask. “Can you tell me the truth?”

And then I regretted revealing everything to her earlier in the train.

4

Names.

“TV”, “tissue”, “contact lenses”, “dog”, “baseball”, “banana”, “cloud”, “atom”, “light”, “Ukraine”, “Hozumi Shiiki”, “Reina Kamisu”.

They’re all just terms given to objects for convenience’s sake. The convenience of using them is not their only purpose, however; names bind concepts, they shape concepts, they draw attention to concepts, and they bring them to life.

“*Reina Kamisu*”—a multifarious phenomenon that kills her observers.

That is how I define “Reina Kamisu”, while ignoring the lack of evidence, reasoning and common sense.

Well, well, there is one question that presents itself: While it is still acceptable to say that this phenomenon assumes different roles and eventually kills whoever perceives her, there is absolutely no justification to link the phenomenon to the name “Reina Kamisu”.

However, even though the phenomenon varies for everyone, we all call it by the same name without any hesitation or doubt. She never called herself that, either.

I take the stairs to the second floor and notice Hozumi-chan standing by the door to my classroom. As I approach her, she notices me as well and we greet each other.

“Senpai. I brooded all night over your hypothesis,” she immediately gets to the point. “As you said, the victims were already aware of the name ‘Reina Kamisu’. The name comes first. Saito-san and Kogure-kun and Kimura-kun and Mizuhara-san and Wakui-senpai and your paths have all crossed somewhere. Which means that you all had the opportunity to learn the name ‘Reina Kamisu’. I agree with the conclusion that you’ve drawn from that, Senpai.”

“—You become infected with Reina Kamisu by learning her name.”

I nod.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize.

Hozumi-chan shakes her head, “Don’t worry. I wished for it myself.”

Right—I made the mistake of telling her the name of “Reina Kamisu”. I was careless. I seem to be constantly giving her trouble.

That being said, I’m pretty sure that learning Reina Kamisu’s name alone does not automatically make her visible to you. This is supported by the fact that she hasn’t shown up in front of Yuji-kun and his classmates even though they’ve heard her name.

There must be some sort of condition. As a matter of fact, the reason why I wanted Yuji-kun to lose interest in the matter was to prevent him from accidentally fulfilling that unknown condition. Wake not a sleeping lion (Reina Kamisu). The best protection against Reina Kamisu is losing one’s interest in her.

“Senpai,” Hozumi-chan says with eyes that let me foresee what she’s going to say. “Let me warn you: it’s useless to try telling me to back out of this matter.”

As I expected.

“...I won’t,” I mutter, and she responds with a happy smile.

Geez...

“Oh, Yoshinon!” she calls out, still smiling brightly. Her eyes are directed at Yoshino-chan who is trotting toward us. “Morning Yoshinon!”

“Morning, Hozumi-chan,” she replies.

“Hey,” I greet her as well.

“G-Good morning... Toyoshina-senpai.”

Again that difference in attitude.

“What’s the matter, Yoshinon?”

“Ah, er, I only saw your bag when I went to our classroom, so I thought you might be here.” With these words, Yoshino-chan scours her own bag and takes out something resembling a massive book.

With a blushing face, she holds it out to me.

“Hm?”

On a closer look it seems to be a graduation album.

“Um... I sneaked into my sister’s room and borrowed her graduation album...”

Now that she mentions it; I completely forgot that I asked her to bring her sister’s album from her time at the Junseiwa School.

“You’re a master thief, Yoshinon!” Hozumi-chan jokes.

“Ew... she wouldn’t have allowed me to take it otherwise... Um, Toyoshina-senpai, may I ask you to return it to me in the course of the day?”

“Yeah, fine by me. Sorry for bothering you,” I apologize to her.

“A, n-no! It was a pleasure!”

It was...? Oh, I should just be thankful.

“All right... I guess I’m off to the library. I want to take a look.”

“Huh? What about school?” Hozumi-chan asks, surprised.

“To be honest, I don’t have time for that now.”

After hearing my response, she (somewhat unsurprisingly) counters, “I’m going with you!”

“...Are you sure?” Yoshino-chan asks.

“Of course. I’m sorry, but can you tell them that I’ve overslept or something?”

“...Okay, I got it.”

Since I’m well aware that it’s no use trying to persuade Hozumi-chan, I keep out of their exchange of words.

“Okay, let’s go senpai.”

“Got it.”

After saying goodbye to Yoshino-chan, we head together to the library room. As we walk there, I sneak a peek at the thick album.

Well, I don’t expect us to discover anything in this album. It’s unlikely that the group suicide over there is connected to Reina Kamisu in any way. Even if she were, I would be surprised to find anything valuable in an album.

However—I was entirely wrong.

Within a mere 5 minutes after taking a seat next to each other, we spotted something.

The heart of the graduation album, the group picture of all members of the class, contained several parts that differed significantly from the rest in terms of size, exposure, background, and so on.

Because of our prior knowledge we can tell why that is. Most if not all of these parts belong to—

—the suicide victims.

“Senpai?”

“Hm?”

“I don’t want to sound silly, but...”

“Yeah?”

“Aren’t there too many pretty girls over there at the Junseiwa School? I’m kind of jealous.”

Honestly speaking, I was too focused on the disagreeing parts to notice. Now that she mentions it, though, I can see that there are indeed a lot of pretty girls in the photo.

“Not only wealthy but also cute and clever... that sure makes me doubt if God really doesn’t give with both hands, as the saying goes,” she comments.

“I don’t think that you need to hide, though, Hozumi-chan.”

“Ah, don’t mind me. You don’t have to pay me lip-service.”

That wasn’t meant as lip-service.

“Anyway, it’s only normal that there would be lot of pretty girls at a renowned all girls’ school,” I say.

“Why? Because only those sorts of girls aim for such a school?”

“I suppose that’s not exactly wrong, either, but consider this: looks are heavily influenced by the genes of one’s parents, right?”

“Yes, so?”

“And here’s the point: Bigwigs almost exclusively get themselves beautiful wives,” I conclude.

Hozumi-chan claps her hands together once.

“The scales fell from my eyes.”

You actually wondered about it?

I decide to let her be and flip the page.

—I stop midway.

“What’s the—” Hozumi-chan asks, only to cut off when she sees the picture I found.

I continue in a mutter in her place.

“—Reina Kamisu.”

That name is written there indeed, but we would have held our breath—and be enchanted—either way.

Because the student depicted—

“—It’s almost absurd how beautiful she is,” Hozumi-chan remarks.

Precisely. She stands out even among the many other pretty faces. If one were to compare her with a diamond, the other students would be crude stones in comparison. As much as I hesitate to admit it, Hozumi-chan wouldn’t leave the slightest impression on me if she stood next to the girl in that picture.

For a while, I am completely taken aback by the photograph and the sheer beauty of the Reina Kamisu in it.

But in reality, that isn't of any import; the picture poses a problem that is much more severe.

"I don't get it... why can we see Reina Kamisu in this picture?"

Hozumi-chan gives me a puzzled glance.

"Reina Kamisu is just a phenomenon. She does not possess a body."

"...Maybe she shows in pictures?"

"Even if that were true, she wouldn't get an entry in an album unless someone actually perceived her."

"Which means that..."

I look at the picture again.

She does not resemble Shizuka; but she does resemble the "Reina Kamisu" I know.

"I think we're on the same track, Hozumi-chan."

"Yes..."

"Most likely—"

Those two Reina Kamisus are *not* equivalent to each other; that's clear just from their looks.

They are, however, both absurdly beautiful.

"—the Reina Kamisu in this picture is a human."

In the end, we didn't attend our classes and instead went straight to Yoshino-chan's address without any notice to her; we wanted to question her sister about Reina Kamisu.

How come the girl in that picture was also called "Reina Kamisu"?

It might be just a coincidence; that would be the most plausible explanation.

The name given to the phenomenon might just have happened to match that of an existing person. But then again, Reina Kamisu is by no means a common name. Moreover, the real person is brought into connection with a group suicide, while the phenomenon entices into suicide, and on top of that, they're both absurdly beautiful and look alike. That's about as crazy as pulling off two royal straight flushes in a row at the beginning of a poker match, but still more down-to-earth than winning the lottery jackpot.

However, I don't know about Hozumi-chan, but at least I discarded that possibility rather quickly.

Because I've actually seen "Reina Kamisu".

I'm certain that anyone who has seen her will agree with me: There is a definite link between the girl in that picture and the phenomenon that shares her name. That's more certain than that bull dogs and chihuahuas are of the same species.

"By the way, the buildings around here are quite something, aren't they?" I say with astonishment.

“I was surprised, too, when I first visited Yoshinon. Would you believe me if I told you that her mom showed up with a Porsche to fetch us?”

“A Porsche? Not bad.”

“But Yoshinon’s still normal; I heard that a large part of the households in this vicinity have their own limousines and drivers.”

Limousines, hm? Sounds like a distant world to me.

Now why would so many inhabitants of that comfy distant world end their lives? They were blessed with both wealth and beauty, and must have been devoid of worries. They had everything that is needed for a happy life.

However, “happiness” is entirely subjective.

A single issue can be perfectly enough for an individual to become unhappy. For example, if the boy or girl you fancy gives you the cold shoulder, you might feel hapless even in a blessed environment. Such an environment amounts to nothing when it comes to fending off the feeling of misfortune.

Therefore, if there was a cause of some kind, it’s entirely possible that even an inhabitant of that distant world committed suicide.

—Reina Kamisu. Did you create that cause? Will you seduce me into suicide as well, as you did with the students of the Shikura middle school?

How?

I try to recall “Reina Kamisu” as I remember her; an absurdly beautiful girl that resembles Shizuka.

What is the role I give to Reina Kamisu? What do I need? *Who* do I need?

Hm?

—Who do I need?

“—”

Reina Kamisu: a phenomenon that takes on various roles. Who resembles Shizuka.

“Senpai? What’s wrong?” Hozumi-chan asks because I suddenly stopped.

Who do I need?

The answer’s obvious: Shizuka. I only need Shizuka.

Having finally found the puzzle piece I was looking for, my rusty faculty of thought is set in motion again and starts to restlessly hunt down answers. Answers, answers, answers... the answers I seek sum up like a snowball.

This leaves me with one more thing that I need: confirmation. Something to prove my answers.

I see.

I see now! I found out, Reina Kamisu!

I raise my head with conviction.

As I thought.

Behind Hozumi-chan, next to a house that looks like a pompous show house exhibition—

—I see Reina Kamisu.

“I see. So we only have to wish for her to show up.
Because—”

I put on a grin.

“—Kamisu Reina is **here**. ”

I walk past Hozumi-chan and head toward Reina Kamisu.

“Senpai!” she shouts out, visibly anxious about my strange behavior.

“Stay away! You must stay away!” I command her as I turn around and scowl at her.

She steps back because of my hard tone.

Yes, that’s the spirit.

I do not care about Hozumi-chan anymore. She’s no longer needed.

“Don’t get in my way!” Leave us alone.

This is what I wished.

This is what I wished Reina Kamisu to be.

“I missed you, Reina Kamisu,” I say as I catch her in a dark back street.

She responds with a smile—an absurdly beautiful smile, much like Shizuka’s.

“Let’s begin with the reason why I didn’t notice you up to now, shall we?”

Reina Kamisu listens silently to me.

“You are a phenomenon that only becomes perceivable by us becoming aware of your existence. There seem to be multiple requirements for that, like knowing your name, but it’s safe to assume that I’ve fulfilled those, since I’ve seen you once before. Then why is that I haven’t been able to see you ever since?”

I am almost glaring at her as I continue.

“It’s because I started to consider you a phenomenon.”

Her cheeks move slightly, but apart from that she stays absolutely silent.

“When assessing a mysterious phenomenon like you from a perspective that is grounded on common sense—and only then—it becomes impossible to admit your existence. Basically, common sense imposed a filter on me that operated in my subconsciousness and prevented your data from getting to me. In order to perceive you nonetheless, it’s thus necessary to either remove that filter or to shift one’s perception of you to something different from a phenomenon.”

This time around, Reina Kamisu gives me a clear response. She nods.

“You appeared before me with a certain role. I am aware of that role by now. One part of it is to help me arrive at the answer I was looking for,” I explain while thinking back at the burning question that plagued me at the time of our first encounter. “But let me ask you something first: Who is that Reina Kamisu in the picture I saw? How is she related to you?”

“She’s a person called ‘Reina Kamisu’.”

I heard her voice for the first time; it’s as beautiful as expected.

“Is she someone else than you?”

“Yes, I suppose she is. In the sense of being a different being.”

“What to you mean by different being?”

She replies to my question with a smile, “She is what you might call my roots, you know.”

“Your roots...?”

Seeing that I can’t quite follow her, she expands on her explanation, “...Why do you think I was given the name of ‘Reina Kamisu’?”

I consider her question. The phenomenon said that the person was her roots, her origin. In other words, the person named Reina Kamisu existed first? So the phenomenon came to be only recently? That doesn’t sound plausible to me. I feel that the phenomenon she represents has always existed, just without anyone finding a way to perceive her—

“—Oh, I got it.”

“Did you?”

“Your name made you perceivable, just like we become explicitly aware of the concept of air by giving it the name ‘air’. Put another way, the phenomenon Reina Kamisu exists because we gave it that name.”

“Exactly.”

That explains why she spreads through her name.

“But why ‘Reina Kamisu’ of all names? Was there no alternative?”

If the Reina Kamisu in that album was a normal person, then there is no reason why “Shizuka Wakui” or “Hozumi Shiiki” or “Yoshino Mitsui” couldn’t serve as a namesake.

“That’s because her existence was singularly close to mine.”

“Close...? Do you mean you blended into other people’s perception of her? Similar to how a non-technical person won’t be able to differentiate between a computer screen and a TV?”

“You’ve guessed right.”

“But then... in what way did the human Reina Kamisu resemble you? In the way that she also caused others to commit suicide?” I ask.

“That’s not correct. When people correctly perceive me, they tend to despair. I’m not responsible for that.”

“Then what else makes her similar to you?”

“Just look at me. It’s our outward appearance.”

“Your appearance?” I frown. “I admit that the photo of your human counterpart resembled you, but your appearance is variable. It changes depending on the observer. It’s not possible to resemble something that doesn’t maintain its shape.”

“But you just admitted that we resembled each other, didn’t you?”

My eyes widen. I nod.

“Let me summarize,” I say.

“Don’t let me stop you.”

“You’re beautiful. Absurdly beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

“And that’s also the impression you make on everyone as a phenomenon.”

“That’s not quite correct,” she argues.

“What do you mean...?”

“I don’t give off an impression of beauty. I am beauty itself.”

“...I’m afraid you lost me.”

“Have you ever heard of the Theory of Forms?”

“I’m familiar with the name, but I don’t know what it means exactly.”

“For example, take an elephant and picture it to yourself.”

I do as she told me and imagine an elephant. The first thing that comes to mind is its long trunk, followed by a picture of its large ears and tusks. The elephant is big and gray and has thick skin. It uses its trunk skilfully to pick food.

“Are you done?”

“Yes.”

“So where did your image of an elephant come from?”

“Where from...?”

Of course from the information stored in my brain. However, it’s impossible for me to tell from which elephant exactly that impression originates. It might be one of the elephants I’ve seen in the zoo in my

childhood, or it might be one from the TV or a book, or perhaps even from someone's description of an elephant.

"All right," she continues, "now imagine you saw an elephant right before you. Would you recognize it as one?"

"Most certainly."

"All right," she says, "now imagine you saw a beautiful person right before you. Would you deem her beautiful?"

I sneak a peek at Reina Kamisu.

"Of course."

"But how do you decide whether or not a beautiful person is beautiful?"

"By—" I pause to consider the hint she's given me.
"—comparing her to my image of a beautiful person and see how close she is, maybe?"

"Correct."

...So is it like this...?

"Reina Kamisu, you are my very image of a 'beautiful person.'"

"Right, I am your archetype of beauty. That's why I look more beautiful to you than anyone else."

I see, that's why Reina Kamisu resembles Shizuka; after all, Shizuka constitutes a great deal of my image of a beautiful girl.

Okay, it looks like I was slightly wrong with my original hypothesis. I thought that Reina Kamisu's resemblance to Shizuka originated from her second role to me.

"My existence is detached from space and time, and is to be found in the world of Forms. Not that the Theory of Forms expresses precisely what I am, but it's close enough. I'm only using this term because there is no other name for it, just like there is no other name for me. But I do indeed exist on the back side—or front side!—seen from you."

"In other words... you live in another world?"

"I don't know if it's really *another* world, but I suppose for the current mankind, who only believe what they see, it actually is another world. My being is entirely dependent on you, so if you define me as non-existent, then there is no world for me to live in. What will never change, however, is that I *do exist*."

"...I think I roughly understand what you are. But then I have a hard time comprehending how the girl in that picture could resemble you."

"Why don't you try to reverse the equation?"

"Reverse?"

"Don't think that Reina Kamisu resembles me—think that I resemble Reina Kamisu."

I don't get it. Isn't that exactly the same thing, except for the order?

Except for the order...?

The Reina Kamisu in the picture was a real person, and therefore had a constant appearance. The Reina Kamisu in front of my eyes, on the other hand, changes her visuals depending on the observer.

The human “Reina Kamisu” had an appearance that nearly everyone would find to be beautiful. That said, so many men, so many minds. In theory, it’s perfectly possible that she’s ugly in someone’s eyes.

The phenomenon, however, must absolutely always be absurdly beautiful. That’s her definition.

To rephrase this: there might be a person who considers the person “Reina Kamisu” as ugly, but the phenomenon as beautiful.

The reverse is impossible.

If I combine that fact with the fact that both the phenomenon and the person look absurdly beautiful, and similar, in my eyes...

“Don’t tell me—”

I already knew that there was another condition apart from knowing her name. Those conditions are necessary to mix up the human Reina Kamisu and the phenomenon.

In other words, people whose image of beauty does not match the looks of the human Reina Kamisu are not able to mix those two up.

Put the other way—

“Only people whose image of beauty does almost precisely match the looks of your human counterpart are able mix you two up and create a link between the name and the phenomenon.”

That is the second condition.

Reina Kamisu nods and adds to my explanation, “And as you mentioned beforehand, I will appear besides everyone who longs strongly enough for me, or more precisely for a replacement of somebody, to override the filter that is their common sense.”

“But most people will eventually regain their common sense,” I continue her intent, “and become unable to place you in the role they gave you. Which means that they will either lose what was vital to them, or despair because they notice that what they believed in was fake. And as a consequence—”

“—they are likely to commit suicide.”

Reina Kamisu—so far I considered her evil in itself. But I was wrong.

She is neither good nor evil; she just exists. She is just a purposeless phenomenon that is forced to appear whenever she is given a name.

That is the truth behind Reina Kamisu.

“Kazuaki Toyoshina,” she says and I raise my head. “What role do *you* give me?” she asks with a smile resembling Shizuka’s.

“...You planning to give me false hopes, just to make me despair in the face of the truth?”

“Perhaps. But you’re not like the others, are you?”

“Not like the others? How so?”

“You are able to perceive me even though you realized that I’m a phenomenon. That’s a remarkable difference, isn’t it?”

That’s true...

I’m already aware of what she really is. I’m not like the others who fell into despair as they approached the truth behind her being. The way to salvation is not going to abruptly break off.

If I give her the role of the person I crave for, I will be able to wallow in a soft dream.

Shizuka does not exist in this world anymore.

Then what should be my decision—?

My decision?

There’s nothing to waver.

I, I—

I take the cross choker out of my pocket. I’ve already noticed what I’m supposed to use it for.

I take a step toward Reina Kamisu.

I won’t return. I don’t need to.

My final step—

“...Senpai.”

—is stopped by that voice.

Didn’t I tell you to stay away? To not get in my way?!

I turn around and glare at Hozumi Shiiki.
Though unsettled by the anger in my look, she continues to speak, "...Who were you talking to, Senpai?"

I don't answer her.

So at the end of the day, she won't recognize what's important for me; she won't take the same path no matter how much she feels attached to me. She isn't worth much to me: neither is she able to substitute Shizuka, nor is she able to make up for her in the slightest.

"Reina Kamisu. Let's meet up tomorrow."

"...Where?"

"*That* place. I'm sure you understand, right?"

Reina Kamisu smiles at me.

"Senpai..."

I ignore Hozumi-chan again. Instead I take the graduation album out of my bag and hand it to her, "Return this to Yoshino-chan, okay?"

With these words I turn away from her.

"Senpai!" she calls out to me from behind. "I... I... what... what do I have to do?! What do I have to do... to walk the same path as—"

"Hozumi-chan," I interrupt her. "Stop bothering me or—"

With my back turned toward her,

"—I will kill you." I spit words of rejection.

I walk away.

I throw everything away.

I throw away even the foolish but gentle girl who has treated me ever so warmly.

I can no longer see anything.

I can no longer hear anything.

Therefore I can absolutely not hear the weeping behind me either.

5

“Let’s get married when we’ve grown up.”

That’s the typical promise made between two childhood friends. You hear it so often in manga or anime or games and so forth that it’s become a cliché. It’s the most straightforward way to ensure an unbreakable bond between the protagonist and the heroine.

But in real life there is no meaning in such a promise.

When we grow up, we don’t remember those childish promises anyway, and even if we do, they have long since expired because we didn’t even know the real meaning of marriage. Only a hopeless fool would take that proposal seriously and ask a girl out on that pretext. Even if two childhood friends date each other, a promise like that does not count as a memory but as a funny story.

We are constantly growing up, leaving behind the past. Therefore, it’s essential to always live in the same time as the other party in order to keep such a promise intact.

At the beginning, neither of the two might know what the difference between boys and girls is, and what it means to get married or to become a couple. From there, they have to keep walking and growing up together, and they will slowly but surely come to understand what it means to find a partner for life. When they do that and still continue to treasure the promise of getting married when they've grown up—and only then—that promise acquires significance.

I consider that a miracle. It's impossible not to withdraw such a promise after getting to know every good and bad trait of the other party, or the dirty differences between boys and girls, or the appeal of the other sex. Maybe they become aware of their feelings for each other *after* parting ways once to find themselves other partners, but it's impossible to constantly hold the belief of belonging together and getting married. I am positive that it's safe to say that such a thing is impossible. That's why I consider it a miracle.

And our relationship was founded on such a miracle.

Though made possible only because of a narrow view and foolishness, I felt quite comfortable with that kind of relationship.

It was extremely dear to me.

With those thoughts in mind, I look around our park.

Here we sat together in a swing. Here we unsuccessfully tried to build a tunnel with sand. Here we did our first forward upward circling on the horizontal bar. The jungle gym I fell from has been removed by now, but this place is still doubtlessly the park that we considered ours.

This is where I spent time with the little Shizuka.

This park shaped us, protected us, and—destroyed us.
Yeah, that's right.

Even the dearest of places may stab you in the back.
Yeah, that's right.

Reality treats saints and sinners all alike, attacking them mechanically, randomly, without any consideration and selection.

Yeah, that's right.

Anything and everything in this world with the exception of Shizuka betrays me.

I feel the content of my pocket with my hand. The cross choker is there. I'm fine.

I close my eyes. Because I don't want to see.

I cover my ears. Because I don't want to hear.

I close myself to the world. Because I don't want to believe.

There is only one thing I need to see now: the phenomenon that exists around me with an appearance similar to Shizuka's.

Reina Kamisu is waiting for me at the center of the park.

“Are you done saying goodbye to your friends?” she asks.

“There is no one I have to say goodbye to.”

“I see...” she notes with a slightly sad smile.

“There is someone I need,” I say with averted eyes.

“I know.”

“I’m helpless without her. I can’t move on at this rate.”

“...I know.”

“I do absolutely and unconditionally need Shizuka Wakui.”

“...I know.”

As I turn to her, I ask, “Do you also have a person who you need?”

After a short pause, Reina Kamisu replies, “I suppose that would be you, Kazuaki Toyoshina.”

“...I see. You’re right. You’re dependent on me, after all.”

“...That’s also part of the reason.”

“Also?”

“I assume it’s due to the role that you gave me, but I seem to... be extremely fond of you. I can’t help wanting to be by your side.”

“...Do you possess feelings?” I ask her.

“I do!”

“But... those were conceived by me.”

“Yes, but they are not false... or would you call feelings that someone created in you false?”

I answer with a weak smile, “I wouldn’t.”

“Right? I do feel the same as a common human when I manifest in front of you, even though I may purely be an idea.”

“Even though you exist solely for the sake of someone else?”

“Yes.”

To be honest, I think that we may resemble each other. I was dependent on Shizuka, too, and lost my place to be when she died.

“We’re much alike,” I say aloud.

“...I suppose you’re right. We’ll get along just fine,” Reina Kamisu smiles at me. “I only exist to fulfill the role you gave to me. I will become who you need and stay by your side.”

“...As my lover?”

“Yes. We will walk side by side for all eternity. You will abandon this world and only concern yourself with me. I know that this is your wish. That this is your happiness.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

With those words, I take the choker out of my pocket.

“That’s a lovely choker,” she remarks.

I silently put the choker that Shizuka wore at the very end around Reina Kamisu’s neck.

“How is it?”

I gaze at her without letting go of the choker, and reply:

“It looks great on you.”

Upon hearing my answer, Reina Kamisu,who resembles Shizuka, smiles.

Suddenly, I wonder where I will be going. Where Reina Kamisu will be guiding me.

I turn my attention at her again; the choker suits her greatly.

I remember ordering it on the Internet because I was too embarrassed to enter a jeweler’s shop. I was astonished when I noticed that the actual thing looked quite different from the pictures, but Shizuka loved my present nonetheless.

When she put it on, she laughed and joked, “Maybe I’m a bit too young for this?” I then told her not to strain herself, but she assured me that she *wanted* to wear it.

It’s a shame, but the choker did not suit her.

I still won’t let go of the choker.

“...Kazuaki?”

Oh boy, God remains cruel to me.

“Don’t call me that!” I shout.

“Eh?”

Reina Kamisu has feelings and is attracted to me on top of that. She’s no different from a human.

“Otherwise it would sound like Shizuka were calling my name, no?”

But I'm the one who set up this scene. I wished all this.

“What do you mean...?” she asks.

It's what I wished for in order to win.

“—You are Reina Kamisu and no one else!”

At her last hour Shizuka wore this choker. It never really suited her. It was a token of our love.

And with this choker, I—

—strangle Reina Kamisu.

At once, her beautiful face that resembles Shizuka's distorts with pain.

“...Wh...y...?”

Despair shows in her face.

“Don't you get it?” I ask without loosening the choker. “You can't become Shizuka, nor can you replace her. You can't satisfy me by any stretch. Being similar to her is by far not enough. If you really were to replace her, you would've had to be as alike as two peas in a pod.”

“...B-But... but then... what is my role...?”

“The answer is staring you in the face.”

I strangle Reina Kamisu's neck so hard that she can no longer say a word. She moans painfully.

“If your role isn't to be my lover and substitute for Shizuka, then it's your role to be—”

“—my enemy!”

Reina Kamisu. I will never forgive you.

I detest the enemy that tormented Shizuka and me.

I detest the park that betrayed us.

I detest the fate that left us with this outcome.

I detest all those non-existent enemies.

That’s why I give that role to you, Reina Kamisu.

That detestable role belongs to you.

“Reina Kamisu, you are—”

“—a monster that must die.”

Reina Kamisu.

You may be a phenomenon—an intangible phenomenon—but I can still kill you.

Don’t you agree?

After all, enemies exist—

—to be killed.

“Die.”

I don’t care if the entire world gets distorted by the erasure of Reina Kamisu.

I don’t care if killing her solves nothing.

It will make nobody happy, not even me.

I'll do it only for me as I go to hell, because it's the only thing I can do.

I will—

“Please, die already!”

—kill Reina Kamisu.

I can clearly feel her neck as I strangle her. The sensation of killing; the realization that her life drains.

I can clearly feel it.

I feel something dwindle away. Maybe it's something that's insignificant to others, something invisible, but my gut feeling rings an alarm bell.

But as much as I try to catch it, it will just run through my fingers.

Whatever it is, it cannot be made undone. Never.

And before I know it, I have arrived where Reina Kamisu was supposed to guide me.

Reina Kamisu—is no more.

The choker has split apart.

...I don't care anymore.

There is no enemy anymore.

There is no Reina Kamisu anymore.

Reina Kamisu is nowhere.

I return from the boundary of worlds and I find myself in another unfamiliar world.

It's the normal, rational, empty world, which I'm supposed to know only too well. Yet, this world strikes me as unfamiliar.

But it's reality. The hard truth.

Therefore, the sight before my eyes is real.

“Why didn't you listen to me?”

I assigned Reina Kamisu the role of my enemy; but in order to confront and have her fulfill that role, there was a need for me to unlock the filter of my common sense.

That's why I closed my eyes, covered my ears and closed myself to the world. I needed to warp the original data into shape.

My enemy.

My memory was manipulated so that I would kill my enemy, Reina Kamisu, by manipulating the flow of information in a way that would present her death as my first priority. The system revolves entirely around her role.

Reina Kamisu is a phenomenon.

She can't physically kill anyone, and no one can physically kill her.

But Reina Kamisu was my enemy.

She had to be killed. I had to physically experience the sensation of murdering her. There was a need to feel her death with my own hands.

As a result...

Didn't I warn you?

—That's why I told you not to stay away from me.

“Hozumi-chan.”

I look down at her. Her face is so distorted with pain that it's painful to look at it directly—and yet there is an undeniable glimmer of satisfaction in her face.

Why?!

It's enough if Reina Kamisu takes on others' roles, so why did you think of taking on the role of Reina Kamisu?

Was keeping up contact with me so important to you? Did you prefer opposing me over being left behind?

You're incomprehensible, Hozumi-chan!

I, yes I, am only concerned with Shizuka and no one else. You can't become Shizuka, nor can you replace her. You can't satisfy me by any stretch.

Why did you want to stick to a guy like me to the bitter end...?

It's a shame. Really. You were so close.

You almost managed to change me—

I look up at the sky as I feel that my fight is over.

Hey Shizuka, I won!
I won against Reina Kamisu and Hozumi Shiiki!
I will continue to love you!
But I feel lonely. Incredibly lonely.
There's no one by my side. I don't allow anyone to be.
I'm sure that it will stay that way, with me continuing
to remain **here**.
Someone, please.
Please, anyone, warm me up.
But I won't allow anyone to do that.
Shizuka. Shizuka.
I don't care if you're a ghost, or a fake, or a humanoid
energy even.
Don't leave me alone.
But Reina Kamisu is no more.
The being that could replace you is no more.
She is not **here** anymore.
I'm all alone.

The only thing left to me is—the invaluable symbol of
Shizuka and my connection.
The cross choker I gave to her. No—
—the *remnants* of it.

Epilogue

I could just as well cram a love letter into a bottle and throw it into the sea: the bottle is unlikely to reach anyone at all, let alone the person it is meant for.

That is how exceedingly hopeless my love is.

He is already devoted to another girl, and if that wasn't enough, my best friend Hozumi-chan turned out to be my rival.

Honestly speaking, I think that this is the end of the road.

I don't want to give up, I really don't, but the situation is hopeless no matter how you look at it. I seriously feel that it's more likely that I will single-handedly conquer Nippon than that my love will be requited. I can't properly talk with boys, I'm nowhere near as pretty as Wakui-senpai or Hozumi-chan, I'm always elsewhere in mind, and I'm not even smart. I'm somewhat wealthy, sure, but that is not a quality of my own.

Right. I'm a no-one. Just a little squirt.

How could someone like me, who only ever tags along after Hozumi-chan, stab her in the back and wipe away Wakui-senpai's shadow that is hanging over him? That's like telling an outstripped runner to catch up with the top runners that are about to reach the finish line.

Epilogue

But as hopeless as the situation may be, my feelings for him are real.

I can say with confidence that I love him more than anyone else. Really. I'm certain that my feelings are stronger than those of Wakui-senpai and Hozumi-chan.

It was love at first sight. My mom might laugh at me and tell me that this isn't true love, but if the feelings that keep me awake and crying every night aren't real, then I'm sure that I myself must be one big lie.

I don't mind if he isn't mine all alone.

I'm happy if I can occasionally profit from tagging along behind Hozumi-chan by getting the chance to talk with him or to touch him from time to time.

May our everyday life stay like this; with a warm and cozy relationship between me, Hozumi-chan and Senpai.

If he pays some attention to me in the process, then I couldn't be happier. And if a miracle were to happen and we became more intimate, I would be able to die without any regrets.

I arrive at our classroom, and notice that there is a commotion. I'm curious what's going on, but I'm hesitant to talk to others without Hozumi-chan.

More importantly, I want to see Senpai. But it seems like Hozumi-chan's isn't here yet, even though she would normally arrive early at the classroom because she also wants to see him as soon as possible.

Has she overslept? She's a late riser, after all.

—Maybe I should just go ahead?

I fiercely shake my head at that thought. I'm not that bold! Ah, that boy over there saw me shaking my head. Ew... they'll think I'm an oddball at this rate....

But yes! I feel courageous today!

I only need to greet him. He always does that, too. Maybe I'll be able to engage him in a chat? About my middle school, maybe? About my sister? There are several possible topics. He's a good listener, so I'm sure we would have a lot of fun even with my poor rhetorics.

After hesitating for a moment, I put down my bag and leave the classroom.

I'm sorry, Hozumi-chan. I think I'll seize the moment.

But... you don't mind, do you? I'm not getting in your way, after all. Besides, I haven't told anyone about my feelings so that you don't blame yourself. So you don't mind, right?

After persuading myself like this, I go downstairs and head to Senpai's class. Having arrived there, I peek into his classroom while avoiding the obstinate glances of the other students.

Found him.

I feel my blood rising to my face.

He's so handsome today. So incredibly handsome.

Upon noticing my glance, he approaches me and waves his hand to greet me. He even came out to the corridor for me! Even though I'm alone right now!

Epilogue

I think I'm going crazy! I feel like running away and hiding again.

“Morning, Yoshino-chan.”

“G-Good morning,” I mutter with a downcast glance, even though I really want to greet him a smile. Ewww... silly, silly! He'll get fed up with me if I keep doing this!

“You're not with Hozumi-chan today...?”

“Ah... yes. She has not arrived yet.”

I suddenly feel like having a fish bone stuck in my throat. No, that strange feeling is more like a whole fish.

But that uncomfortable feeling is wiped away with his next sentence.

“Yoshino-chan, can we talk in private?”

“Eh? Huh?!” I unwittingly rasp. “I-In private?”

“Yeah.”

“W-Why—?”

I'm still dumbfounded when he draws closer to me to whisper into my ear. *S-Senpai, don't come so close... i-it's embarrassing.*

“...Because I noticed your feelings.”

“Eh? EEH?!” I croak again and draw the attention of others on me. It's embarrassing, but I can't be bothered right now.

Oh my god... I want to cry. I can no longer be together with him. Even though I have wished for our relationship to stay that way just a few minutes ago!

I raise my face, determined to say something to somehow maintain the status quo. Not that I've come up with anything yet.

Epilogue

But seeing his face, I am now startled in a different sense.

He is extremely calm.

Why? He is not a person who would turn somebody down with such an expression. But then...? What's the meaning of that expression?

“S-Senpai...?”

“Hm?”

“C-Correct me if... I’m wrong, but... Ah! You might think that I’m babbling strange things, but... do my, um, feelings happen to be... *not* an annoyance to you...?”

I mustered approximately a lifetime’s worth of courage to ask this question. I’m prepared to drop dead on the spot if I misunderstood him.

But he answers me with a smile.

“Of course they’re not an annoyance. I feel honored!”

Aah...

I can’t believe it. I can’t believe it!

If he’s telling the truth, I can’t help doubting if the earth is still rotating as it should be. The sun must have risen in the west today and it’s going to set in the east.

But this clearly is reality.

He smiles gently, “So, Yoshino-chan? Can we talk in private now?”

“Y-Yes, of course.”

After I say so, he clasps my hand and takes me somewhere.

Take me wherever you want. I don’t care where we go as long as we’re together.

Epilogue

I still feel the strange sensation from earlier, but I decide to not mind. I don't care if I've forgotten something, either. It all doesn't matter if I can be together with him.

He notices my fixed glance on him and gives me an absurdly beautiful smile.

As I feel the warmth of his hand, I pray:

Dear God, may my beloved senpai—

—may Reina Kamisu-senpai always be **here**.

Afterword

To those who already know me, hello again, and to all the others, pleased to meet you. This is Eiji Mikage.

We decided to go without pictures for this novel as with my debut novel. Sorry for getting a special treatment. I'm actually a shy man who inherently prefers to stay in the shadows (it's in my name, after all)! So much that I had to look away when I spotted someone reading my debut novel one day after its release on the train.

Let me introduce this novel in a few words.

This story is quite similar to my debut novel in terms of style. There are many differences, of course, but I believe you will notice that it is written by the same author. The most significant difference might be the fact that I put more thought into the overall structure.

The protagonists are rather clumsy, but that's how they turned out when I envisioned their behavior in a setting like this. Also, I would be happy if you didn't dismiss them as purely fictional characters while you are reading this book... but that's just the selfish of a writer.

I don't really know what genre this story is. I don't like to constrain myself to something like that while writing, which of course generates certain risks... that

said, it's certainly necessary to decide on what's important and what's not in order to maintain a good balance.

This novel is titled “Kamisu Reina wa Koko ni Iru” (Reina Kamisu Is Here) and a sequel titled “Kamisu Reina wa Koko ni Chiru” (Reina Kamisu Disperses Here) will come out next month. However, the books are basically stand-alone, so I don't consider them part 1 and part 2. This novel can be enjoyed as-is, but there are important revelations in “Chiru”. Give it a read if you're interested.

Finally, I would like to offer my thanks to my supporters.

Many thanks to my current and my previous editor in charge, to my third friend in the editorial staff, the designer, the proof-readers, and everyone else who helped making this novel happen.

I would also like to thank the entire editorial staff for giving me the chance to release another book.

And last but not least, thanks to my readers.

I would be honored to see you again next month in “Kamisu Reina wa Koko ni Chiru.”